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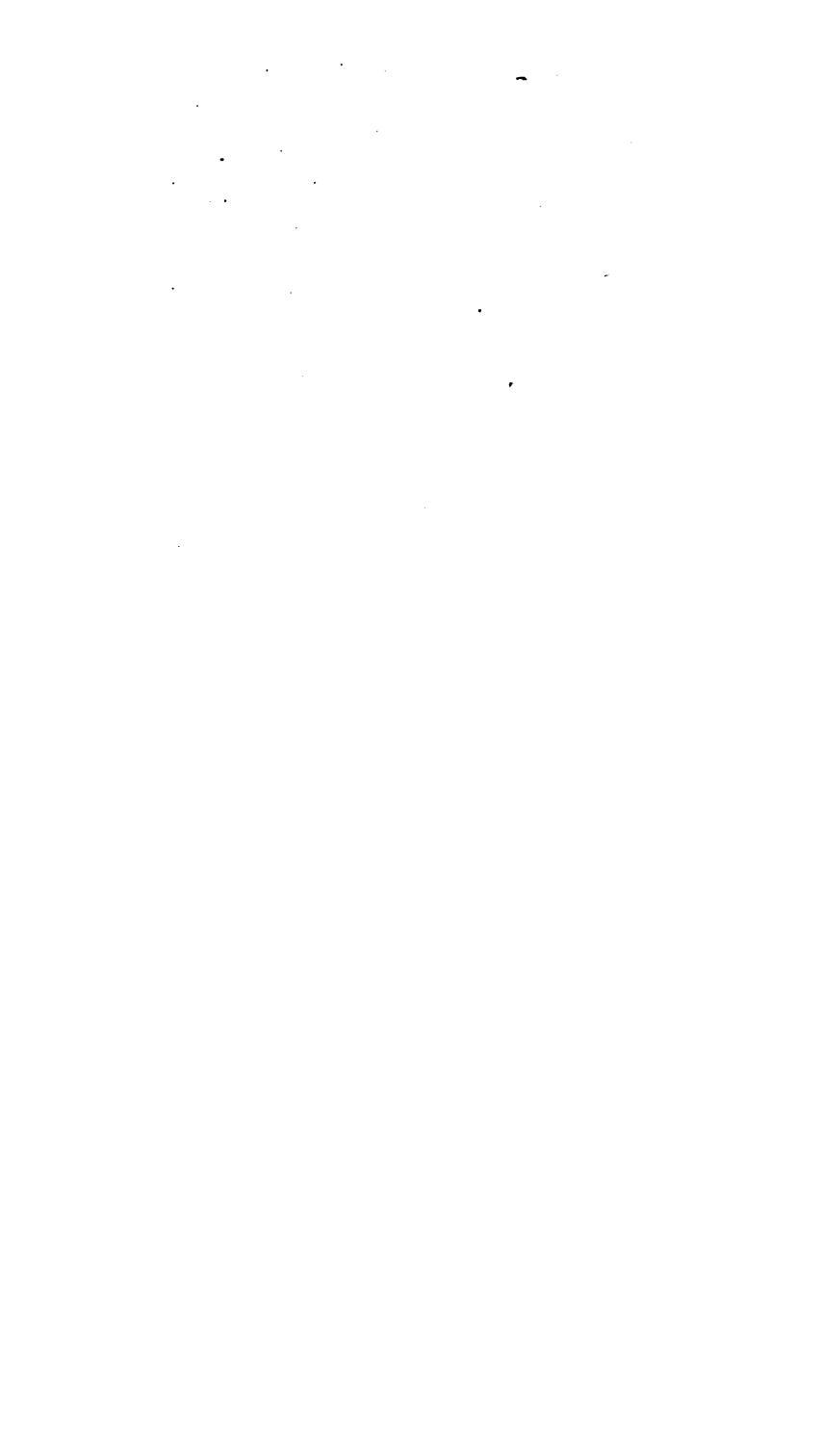
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DAISIES AND BUTTERCUPS
A NOVEL OF THE UPPER THAMES





DAISIES AND BUTTERCUPS

A NOVEL OF THE UPPER THAMES

BY

MRS. J. H. RIDDELL

AUTHORESS OF "GEORGE GEITH," "THE SENIOR PARTNER," ETC.

LONDON :

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, SEARLE & RIVINGTON, 188, FLEET ST
1883.

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11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

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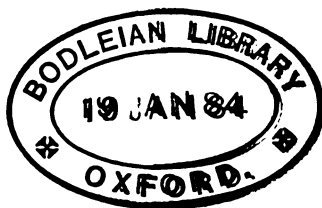
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AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.



TO MY COUSINS,
COLONEL AND MRS. KILSHAW IRWIN
(MOBILE, ALABAMA),
I dedicate this Book,
IN THE HOPE THAT TO ONE OF THEM IT MAY
RECALL A PLEASANT MEMORY
OF THE
GREEN FIELDS AND SOFTLY GLIDING STREAMS OF
SURREY.

CHARLOTTE E. L. RIDDELL

London, 1882.



CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—MR. AMIOTT'S BEQUEST	1
II.—YOUNG MR. ALLAN	15
III.—IN COSTER SQUARE	24
IV.—ARCADIA	41
V.—ADELAIDE LEMBERG	64
VI.—SAD MEMORY	73
VII.—BESSIE	86
VIII.—MISS DODMAN	104
IX.—AN INCREDIBLE SUGGESTION	114
X.—TO BE LET	125
XI.—MR. RODEWALD	132
XII.—THE RIGHT OF WAY	147
XIII.—REEDBOURNE	160
XIV.—MR. RODEWALD IN CHURCH	168
XV.—PREACHERS AND HEARERS	181
XVI.—AT REEDBOURNE STATION	193
XVII.—A LITTLE DISCOVERY	199
XVIII.—A SMALL ADVENTURE	208
XIX.—THE THIN EDGE OF THE WEDGE	218
XX.—TÊTE-À-TÊTE	229
XXI.—MR. SMITH ACTS ON IMPULSE	242
XXII.—MISS WICKENDEN'S DILEMMA	256

CHAP.	PAGE
XXIII.—AFTER DINNER	266
XXIV.—THROUGH THE NIGHT	284
XXV.—MR. RODEWALD IS AMAZED	294
XXVI.—"UNDER THE GIANT OAK"	300
XXVII.—ON THE CALAIS SANDS	314
XXVIII.—OLD SCENES	333
XXIX.—BESSIE'S LOVER	348
XXX.—PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL	366
XXXI.—"HEAR, HEAR!"	377
XXXII.—MISS WICKENDEN'S SURMISES	394
XXXIII.—AT THE FERRY	403
XXXIV.—MR. RODEWALD'S OPPORTUNITY	416
XXXV.—HOW SHE CAME BACK TO ME	429
XXXVI.—MR. SMITH DECLINES	437
XXXVII.—REEDBOURNE IS ASTONISHED	446
XXXVIII.—MR. FRANKFORD MEETS HIS MATCH	460
XXXIX.—CONCLUSION	475

DAISIES AND BUTTERCUPS.

MR. CHEVERLEY AS NARRATOR.

CHAPTER I.

MR. AMIOTT'S BEQUEST.

FAR enough from London to be in the midst of all country sounds and sights and yet near enough London to enable many a careful clerk and eager man of business to travel thither day after day, is a village called Reedbourne. It lies in the pleasant county of Surrey—far away in the valley of the Thames. There I own a small freehold cottage, together with a garden and five acres of land. Some day I shall make a good sum of money out of those five acres, but that day is not yet; and if it were, would have nothing to do with my story.

An' it please you to listen, I will tell how I became possessed of my modest little estate; I, who was only a clerk in an insurance office, receiving in my more than middle age the not enormous salary of one hundred and fifty pounds per annum.

Pray do not misunderstand me. If I seem to grumble at the remuneration, I really only grumble at myself. One hundred and fifty pounds a year is not an annual stipend that as a rule satisfies the desires of men; yet I was not merely satisfied with the amount of my salary, but grateful for it.

This is a hard confession to make when a person has arrived at my time of life, but it *is* bitterly true. On my

fiftieth birthday, as it happened, I received the advance which raised the amount of my pay to the sum mentioned, and on my fiftieth birthday as I walked home alone to lodgings where neither kith nor kin ever greeted me, I looked back over my life—stood,—if I may use the expression, at a little distance from myself, and admitted one hundred and fifty pounds a year was all I was worth. Man and boy I had been a clerk for thirty-five years; and if for five and thirty years any one can sit on a stool behind a desk, and perform office drudgery for a salary which culminates in something less than three pounds a week, why there can be very little in him, at least that is my opinion.

It is quite certain, however, there is very little in me. The few people who like me and the great many people who dislike me are fully agreed on that point. If there be no other subject upon which my acquaintances hold identical views, and I do not think there is, from sewage to salvation, they are at least unanimous in their opinion of my utter incapacity, for which reason, setting aside all other reasons, I should never venture to tell a tale in which I held any prominent place.

The reader may make himself quite easy on that score. Nothing much worth recounting ever happened to me in the course of my life. In the experience of more than half a century I can recall the occurrence but of two circumstances affecting myself personally which fairly astonished me, and one of them was the advent of a legacy.

When Messrs. Greatchild, Fairboy, and Goodlad, commonly known in the city as "The Three Children," sent a clerk round to our office with a note requesting my presence at their office, I regarded the invitation as one which had reference simply to some business connected with the "Home and Foreign Insurance Company." That the Firm in question should want to see me in my modest capacity as a mere individual never crossed my mind.

But I was soon undeceived. When I entered the presence chamber, tenanted on this occasion by Mr. Fairboy, he actually rose from his chair and, holding out his hand, greeted me with a cordiality which made me fear that owing to some mistake the eminent firm in which he was partner had really intended to send for our secretary, or our actuary, or our solicitor, or our doctor—for anybody,

in fact, on the face of the earth except me, Reuben Cheverley, aged fifty, a clerk whose salary had only a week previously been advanced from one hundred and thirty pounds per annum to one hundred and fifty.

"Pray sit down, Mr. Cheverley," he said quite pleasantly. "I took the liberty of sending round to you, because there are a few questions I wish to ask, just as mere matters of form, you understand?"

"I shall be happy to reply to any questions it may be in my power to answer."

In all those long years I had learned caution, and how could I tell for whom this unit of "The Three Children" might be acting.

"Yes, yes, yes, very proper indeed," observed Mr. Fairboy, perceiving the way my thoughts tended. "But the fact is, the questions I want to put have nothing to do with the 'Home and Foreign;' they concern you, and you only."

"Concern me!" I repeated in amazement.

You see, dear reader, if already I may call you so, for a quarter of a century, or thereabouts, my identity had been merged in that of the "Home and Foreign," I was less to outsiders a human being possessed of any individuality than a clerk. Even to my landlady, I was not so much Mr. Cheverley as a "gentleman in the great insurance office in Bucklersbury." That fact meant I could pay my rent regularly, and therefore recommended itself to the worthy woman.

The lips which once tenderly uttered the familiar sentences, "Is that my boy? Is it Rube?" had been cold enough and silent enough for many and many a winter and summer, and since the day when I kissed them for the last time no one of my kith or kin had ever kept watch by the fireside for my return, or greeted my home-coming on the dull, wet nights or the lovely spring evenings with a smile of happy welcome.

"I think," went on Mr. Fairboy, without noticing my surprised repetition of his words; "I think, Mr. Cheverley, your father was a clergyman? Correct me, please, if I am wrong."

"You are quite right, sir," I answered; "my father was the Reverend Caleb Cheverley, Vicar of Littlelands in Somersetshire."

As I spoke there came wafted to me, across the interval of thirty-five years, the scent of the lilacs growing inside the modest paling, the sound of the cooing of the pigeons as they ridiculously strutted along the highest ridges of the old-fashioned red-tiled barn. Ah ! me. Ah ! me. That memory should remain so fresh and young, while men and women grow so gray and old !

"Do you happen to recollect your mother's maiden name ?" asked Mr. Fairboy, settling his double eye-glasses firmly on his aquiline nose, and referring to a paper lying beside his desk.

"Amiott," I replied. "Celeste Amiott. She was the daughter of an Admiral Amiott, and ran away with my father, then only a curate. Her family never held any communication with her after her marriage."

"Was not there some entailed property in the Amiott family ?" inquired Mr. Fairboy.

"Yes, I think so ; but I fear you can hardly depend upon my memory concerning that point, as the knowledge of it merely came to me through casual conversation. My mother herself knew very little about the matter, except that her uncle, Squire Amiott, owned some large estates in Cheshire."

"I suppose he never did anything for you, Mr. Cheverley ?"

"No, sir." I was about to add no one had ever done anything for me ; but I remembered that, thirty-five years before, I had been given a letter of introduction which gained me, at the age of fifteen, a salary of six shillings a week, to which introduction I owed, doubtless, my present stipend of one hundred and fifty pounds a year. Some people are able to forget these things, but I am not one of them ; and accordingly I substituted for the sentence which rose to my lips, the words :

"So far as I am aware, none of my mother's relations ever recollected the fact of my existence."

"You are wrong there, quite wrong," said Mr. Fairboy with the glee of a man who has been leading up to a point. "One of your mother's relatives—" and here he rose, and discarding his eyeglasses, looked at me genially from the hearthrug, whereon he stood airing himself after the fashion of Englishmen—"has recollected your existence to some

rose Amriott, of Grange Leigh, Cheshire, on of his dearly loved sister, Celeste, the sand pounds."

voice as he concluded his sentence, till it e spoken in church, and unconsciously I livine service were going on, and intoned, some mistake. It cannot be—it cannot." my wants were so few, I never thought, it hen, what ten thousand pounds could do for consider, remembering the cruel poverty, tion of my mother's widowed life, was that n thousand pounds from her own brother, ed beyond all power of benefit from money, ful mockery.

mistake, Mr. Cheverley, I believe. In a [hope, with the aid of a few more par- I should say of a few more necessary nd you over the money. We were Mr. , and we have known for some time the favourably remembered in his will."

e remember me?" I asked, and I know hoarse and unfamiliar as I spoke.

sir," observed the solicitor (heretofore / ir to solicitors), "there comes a time and nen when they remember the duties they he ties they have tried to forget. That ur client. In his will he mentions the duced him to leave something to his Cheverley, as a token of respect. I shall you on a copy of the paragraph that

sir." Once again, I, rising to depart, felt a clerk in the "Home and Foreign," and rboy guessed the fact.

ll comparatively a young man," he said l this legacy will enable you to begin life for the second time."

only smiled, and, shaking my head, walked e, for the first occasion in all my long ex- ng purely and simply that I could not be must be some other than Reuben Cheverley ! is, it was *all quite real*. My uncle had left

me—me—ten thousand pounds, and for the future I could be, if I liked, independent of the world—so far as the *£ s. d.* question was concerned, at any rate. Just at first it all seemed to me a cruel and a bitter mockery that the son of the woman who had died lacking everything, save what her child's poor industry could add, in the way of luxury to her scanty income, should experience such a fearful reverse of fortune! Supposing now it had been one thousand pounds—that sum would not have upset my mental equilibrium! One thousand as a provision against old age, as a something which should render me indifferent to the caprices of new directors, and the touches and twinges of coming years! That amount would indeed have surprised, but could not have stricken me with so terrible a sense of uselessness, and almost injustice as was the case. What should I do with ten thousand pounds? I, whose habits were formed, whose wants were so few, whose tastes were so simple?

I had no wife; in the interest of my only niece, a nursery governess at Blackheath, my life was insured for a small sum in the "Home and Foreign." I could afford to buy more books, certainly; but already I felt, with Charles Lamb, that where there was no longer any necessity for pinching, in order to purchase them, one half the enjoyment of their possession would be gone.

Money brings its pleasures with it if it also brings its cares. Afterwards I found out that fact, but at first I can truly say the strongest feeling I experienced was one of bewildered discomfort. How should a man inured to poverty, who had grown accustomed to pinching and saving—to taking care of his clothes and limiting himself as to diet—how should he—or, in plainer language, how should I—divest myself of the habits engendered by thirty-five years of usage, and learn not the way to save, but the way to spend? There had been a time, a short time, when, given the opportunity, I might have spent liberally, foolishly; but of that time I will not speak just yet. Rather at present let me tell of how others insisted upon my making a beginning in the noble art of squandering money—a beginning which so sickened me of the whole game of waste that ere long I was sailing in quite secure, if not very exciting, waters.

By some chatter of one of the "Three Children's" clerks,

it came to the knowledge of my office companions that I had been left "something 'andsome," as the young fellow who was the first to congratulate me worded his sentence ; and then the talk—idle talk, foolish talk, shop talk, in a word, which varies in reality very little from the drab's talk to a charwoman in a lodging-house, to the talk of the gentlemen employed in her Majesty's Service in the Government offices—began to run upon the line that the fortunate recipient of Ambrose Amriott's legacy ought to give a dinner.

Of my own inclination possibly, nay, indeed, I may say certainly, I should never have given a dinner to celebrate the advent of that ten thousand pounds, which came so much too late, if, indeed, money ever can come too late ! But then one rarely in this world is able to follow the bent of one's own inclination ; and so I agreed to give the repast mentioned, merely stipulating that some other than myself should have the ordering and organising of it. For, indeed, I understood as little about dinners as I did about ten thousand pounds ; and after fifty—

But tut !—of what am I dreaming ? Why cannot I remember the generation I have the privilege of addressing is one which has learnt the secret of perennial youth ?

Still, when a person at fifty feels really old, it is extremely difficult for him to learn new tricks, even though those with whom he is thrown in contact are as willing to instruct as was the case at our office.

Only one man among my fellow-clerks held more aloof after the news of my legacy was bruited about ; and he had always been an individual who kept himself to himself, and was careful to have nothing to do with any of us after business hours, and as little during business hours as might be. For form's sake he was solemnly invited to partake of the dinner, young Cathcart, who knew most about those things as we supposed, ordered, in my name, at "The Albion," but he returned a refusal, almost insulting in its brevity, and volunteered the remark, Cathcart declared, "that a fool and his money are soon parted." Since, however, a strict regard for truth was not an integral part of Mr. Cathcart's nature, it is quite possible Holway never said anything of *the kind*.

The dinner was in proper time cooked and eaten. The guests pronounced it capital ; and indeed, judging from the

bill, it ought to have been good enough to please the palates of persons accustomed to greater luxuries than even Cathcart, whose father's second cousin had been Lady Mayoress. My health was proposed; and to this hour I have a vivid recollection of the mental agonies I endured while striving to gasp out a speech, thanking my friends for their kindness in drinking it. But for Barrigan, who prompted me, and Thompson, who said "Hear, hear," whenever I paused, searching about for an idea, I should have remained utterly dumb; but at last the ordeal was over, and I with tingling fingers and burning cheeks free to sit down.

As for the next morning I would rather say very little about it. When I awoke the Sunday bells were ringing with all their might, and each stroke of the hammer appeared to fall on my aching head. My mouth was parched, my temples throbbing, the room seemed to be whirling round and round, the pillows to be slipping away from me; not, I can declare, that I had partaken of much wine; but when a man is not in the habit of taking any stimulant save half a pint of bitter with his mid-day chop, two or three glasses of sherry with a like number of champagne to follow, and a little neat brandy, recommended by Cathcart as a mere safeguard against accidents, produce an extraordinary effect.

They did upon me, at all events. Never have I forgotten the nausea, shame, disgust, of that awakening. I could not touch my breakfast, the very sight of dinner filled me with loathing, I drank cold water by the pail, and managed in the evening to drag myself to church, feeling more thoroughly a "miserable sinner" than I had ever done before in the whole course of my life. I felt ashamed to show myself at the office on the Monday morning; and when I did show myself, with an affectation of never having had anything the matter, which proved perfectly successful, I was appalled to see the unblushing effrontery of Cathcart when alluding to the "soda consolers" he had swallowed, and to hear the dramatic rendering Barrigan gave of his landlady saying, "This day week, sir, then, if you please, this day week! Mine is a quiet 'ouse—and a ree-spectable—and—a sober!"

"You should have seen my old woman," supplemented

Thompson ; "she delivered an essay on Man that would have astonished Pope."

"Are you sure it was not on Beasts ?" asked Holway, who entered at the moment, and proceeded to hang up his hat.

"You ought to give an entertainment to the ladies connected with this staff," suggested young Cathcart to me, ignoring the question, "so as to set yourself and us right in their eyes. Say a picnic up the river, or a dinner at Richmond or Greenwich, or a dance, or some delicate attention of that sort. I shall be most happy to devote my poor services to make any little thing you may decide on, a success."

"You are very kind, Cathcart," I answered, "but I do not intend to give any more parties."

"No ?"

"No. I am quite in earnest. I am glad to believe you enjoyed yourself on Saturday evening ; but I have no thought of giving a series of entertainments."

"Lost his money, for a ducat," commented Cathcart.

"Always thought it was a fluke," muttered Thompson.

"Going to marry a lady in the serious line," suggested Barrigan.

"Was drunk himself, I'll bet you a sovereign," hazarded Jerman, "and got notice from his landlady."

"I just wish to ask you, Mr. Cheverley," interposed Holway at this juncture, "whether a fortnight ago such an unseemly riot would have been permitted to prevail in this office? You know it would not ; and if it continue, I shall lodge a complaint about it myself."

"Bravo, Holway !" said Thompson, ruling a red line.

"Liver out of order, old chap?" observed Cathcart, dexterously lodging a paper pellet inside Holway's coat-collar.

"Hush ! Here's— 'Allow me to hand you a prospectus, sir,'" whispered Barrigan, as our manager crossed the threshold.

After he had entered his private room there was silence for full a quarter of an hour, during which time nothing could be heard save the *noise of pens* scraping over paper, and the *bang-banging* of the outer doors, as messengers passed in and out, and different officials, all more or less

true to time, made their appearance. For some reason, Monday morning is not, I have noticed, a favourable period at which to observe the punctuality of gentlemen in the receipt of salaries.

After a little space Holway left his desk, and, taking down his hat, looked at it with an air of interrogation and irresolution.

"What, going out again?" exclaimed Thompson.

"Blest if the directors will stand this!" murmured Jerman. "I'll draw their attention to it, see if I don't."

"Going to take a turn among the twelve tribes, Holway?" inquired Barrigan.

"If you are detained at Sloman's send to us, and we will *all* come and see you," said Cathcart.

"Try to persuade Messrs. Doe and Roe and relatives to insure their valuable lives in our office. The commission would help to pay debt and costs, you know."

"What does it mean?" I asked, as Holway, with a muttered oath, flung himself out of the office. "Is he embarrassed?"

"Ra—ther," observed Jerman.

"Got among the Jews, poor devil," explained Barrigan.

"So far as my experience goes," put in a stripling, named Allan, "the Jews are not a bit worse than the Christians—better."

"So far as your experience goes, Tommy!" repeated Jerman. "That is good. Did you begin accepting bills when you were in petticoats?"

"But I thought," I said, turning to Thompson, "Holway was as steady as old Time?"

"So he is; but how the deuce can a man with a dozen children, and a new baby every Christmas Eve, make both ends meet on a hundred a year?"

"Mr. Cheverley, *may* I trouble you to take this round to Mr. Fairboy, and ask him to send a verbal answer?" said the manager, at this moment opening his door.

Before the advent of my legacy his address would have been, "Cheverley, step round with this," but "other times other manners;" and already I had begun to look upon this unwonted courtesy as my due.

"Mr. Cheverley, *may* I offer you the pleasure of my company round the corner?" whispered Jerman, as I

passed behind him on my way out. A sad set of irreverent scoffers for an elderly gentleman possessed of money to consort with!

That idea struck me forcibly while I walked to Fairboy's. Hitherto the chaffing, the grinning, the gibing, the folly of my fellow-clerks had never troubled me, because, like Holway, I held myself aloof—kept myself to myself, as he would have said; but now, *nolens volens*, they were determined to have me for one of them, and I did not like it. There was an unfitness about the position which involved difficulties never previously thought of. Poverty had, happily, heretofore prevented my having much association with these wild spirits; but, unless I gave myself "airs," how could I ever hope to keep clear of them in the future? With that question still unsolved I turned into the offices of the "Three Children," and with it still on my mind received the verbal answer our chief required from Mr. Fairboy.

"By the bye, Mr. Cheverley," said that gentleman, as I was leaving his room, "how are you going to invest your money?"

"I thought of leaving it where it is," I answered modestly.

"What! on mortgage, at three and a half per cent? Absurd! Come round to me some morning, and let us talk matters over. Why, bless my heart! it only produces now three hundred and fifty a year; it is what the parsons call buried in a napkin—buried in a napkin," repeated "Meshach," as he had been named by Barrigan, pleased at the wonderful appropriateness of his own simile. "I am busy now, but look in some morning, and meanwhile I will think the matter over. There are heaps of good investments open, going a-begging, as one might say, goin' a-beggin', that being the easy manner in which Mr. Fairboy in the abandon of friendly intercourse pronounced the phrase.

Coming out I found myself close to Holway in close conversation with the "Three Children's" managing clerk.

"They say they won't give an hour after twelve o'clock to-morrow," the latter was remarking as I passed; and five minutes later Holway resumed his place at his desk, very ashen in colour and *very shaky about his hands*, smelling

also, as I could not avoid noticing, of gin, which odour he had futilely tried to cover with the treacherous fragrance of cloves. Well, if a man can ever stand excused for drinking in the morning it is surely when only twenty-four hours intervene between himself and ruin, and he sees no prospect of any temporal salvation being wrought during that interval.

When, after hours, Barrigan and I were wending our way northward towards our respective lodgings, I took the opportunity of asking my companion if he happened to know where Holway lived.

"Holway! O, out Leytonstone way; he has a bit of a farm there where he keeps cows and pigs, and ducks and poultry, grows his own potatoes, and drags up the twelve young ones. But I say, Cheverley, don't you go helping him. He is an ill-conditioned, sulky, self-sufficient prig, and even if he were not, it would be only throwing good money after bad. What *can* a man in his position do except have a periodical whitewash? Let him whitewash; it is sure to have to come to that one day, and the sooner he gets the operation over, the fresher and lighter he will feel."

"But his wife and children?"

"When a fellow is locked up, somebody always helps the wife and children. It is like being widowed and orphaned. Look how well all the widows and orphans get on, far better than those who have husbands and fathers. Promise me now that you won't be wasting your money on a cad who could not say 'thank you' if he tried; I have your good at heart, Cheverley, I do assure you I have."

"Thank you, Barrigan, I appreciate your kindness," I answered, scarcely knowing indeed what to answer.

"And if I were you," went on my friend, "I would cut the whole concern, that I would. What do you want with a salary? Besides, you would be richer without it. There is not one of us, except perhaps Holway, who has not borrowed money from you, and we will go on doing it. We have begun and we can't help ourselves. If you are wise just send in your resignation, not that I want to step into your shoes, pray understand that clearly, but there are things fitting and things unfitting; and no man owning a cool ten thousand has a right to pocket the salary, which

would make 'all the difference' to some other fellow ; so good-bye, old chap, no offence being meant, none taken, I hope ? ”

“ Quite the contrary,” I assured him and we separated : Mr. Barrigan, not exactly sober, turning into the nearest public-house to string himself up yet a little more before again encountering his landlady, to whom he owed Heaven knows how many weeks' rent ; I to partake of tea, after which meal I made my way to Leytonstone.

Thinking that perhaps Holway might object to see me if I sent in my name, I told the little maid-servant merely to say, “ a gentleman wished to speak to her master.” It was a thoughtless thing to do, as I understood the moment I saw Holway. I stood in the shadow while the light from a candle on the hall table showed me the ghastly pallor of his face.

“ *My* name is Holway,” he said, coming forward to the door and speaking like a man who believed the evil hour, so long expected, had struck at last. “ What is it ? ” and his breath came in quick short gasps.

“ Nothing to be troubled about,” I said cheerfully. “ Don't you recognise me ?—I am Cheverley.”

“ What do you want with me ? ” he asked. I fancy he said, “ What the d—— ” as a preliminary, but let us give him the benefit of the doubt.

By this time the little servant had discreetly withdrawn, and so I answered without any hesitation, “ I want to help you if I can.”

“ Help me ! to help me ! was that what you said ? Nobody can help me.”

“ Let me try at any rate,” I urged, stepping in and closing the door as I spoke. “ Is not there any place where we can talk quietly together for five minutes ? ”

Mechanically he took up the candle and led the way into a room otherwise unlighted, and destitute of fire, furnished in the plainest and simplest manner possible.

“ A poor place,” he said, following the direction of my eyes, which unintentionally wandered round the apartment. “ *But it is home.* ” And then his voice faltered, and he lapsed into silence.

“ I never knew till to-day,” I began, taking a chair of my own accord, for he did not ask me to be seated, “ that

you were in any difficulty. How much is it, and what is it for?"

He hesitated for an instant, then pointed to the door.

"Cheverley," he said, "you know the way back to London; take it. I daresay you meant well and kindly in coming here to-night, but go; you can't do me any good, and you are certain to do yourself harm."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why, man alive, can't you see? Do you think it a thing possible a fellow with my family could keep out of debt? The disease is intermittent, but incurable. If you abate the symptoms to-night, the fever will appear again to-morrow, and in perhaps a worse form than ever. I blame nobody. I don't even blame myself; but I cannot cut the cloth to make a coat that anyhow will fit me, and so I must take the consequences. I don't want your money, Cheverley. I hope I am not a leech, like those fellows at the office, who will suck you dry before they have done with you. What I have to face, I must face, and so go, and good night."

"I shall not go," I answered, "till you tell me the amount of your difficulty."

He fought with me for a long time, he resisted my entreaties, parried my questions, was almost rude in his answers, but at last he was beaten.

"Mind," he said, "it is with no goodwill of mine you are mixing yourself up with my affairs. Ten to one, you will never get even the interest on your money. I shall be in a like strait again most likely before I am two years older. When that time comes——"

"It will be soon enough to meet the fresh trouble, whatever it may be," I interrupted, finishing his sentence for him.

After some more conversation I left without even going through the ceremony of shaking hands; but I knew, though he parted from me almost churlishly at the little gate leading into the country lane, along which I floundered through the darkness, that he stood with his head leaning against the top bar, thanking God, after some fashion of his own, for the deliverance which had come.

CHAPTER II.

YOUNG MR. ALLAN.

THERE was in those days no quieter and more utterly country a lane, within a radius of eight miles round London, than that leading from Leytonstone to Leyton Station. By some accident, when I turned away from Holway, I took the wrong direction, and walked off southward instead of north-east, as I should have done. On, and still on, never meeting a creature from whom I might inquire my road, and only vaguely guessing I could not be going very much astray by the railway signals in the distance, and the glimpse I occasionally caught of lights, that proved a town was not far remote.

How silent it was, though! Every now and then I stopped and listened, if I may use the expression, to the utter stillness of the night. No cries, no laughter, no talking, no carts, no organs, no sound of horses' feet, no tramp of pedestrians echoing along the pavement. No. Silence, utter silence! save when a gust of the March wind tossed the branches of the still bare trees, when a dog barked in a lonely farmyard, or the noise of a train speeding off to Cambridge through the Lea Marshes broke the quiet, which almost made the ears of a Londoner, like myself ache with its intensity.

How pure the air was! How it seemed to brace me up and to invigorate all my faculties! In the darkness I felt young again. No tell-tale daylight was there to make merry over the years which had come and gone since I, a lad, walked through the night in the quiet peaceful country; no garish sun mounted, higher and higher, to show more clearly my hair grown thin and turning gray, the methodical elderliness of my lean spare figure, the wrinkles across my forehead, the crows'-feet about my eyes. Just for a little space, just while I walked along Green Grove-lane in the darkness, inhaling the night scents of the early spring, my short youth came back and dwelt with me, came back like one long departed, *and who can make but brief tarrying when he returns.*

It was very sweet, so sweet that I felt loth to go forward to the highway and relinquish the delusion ; so sweet that the lights at the Low Leyton Station seemed to blind and aggrieve me, and when I was told there would be no train for another hour, but that I might possibly catch one on the main line at Stratford, I felt it quite a relief to pass once more into the darkness, and try again to gather up the threads of the illusion, all broken though they were.

Looking back, I know it must have been on that night the idea of making a home for myself among green fields and pastures new first entered my mind ! for hitherto it had never occurred to me even to wish to leave London. To jog on over the same thoroughfares thirty-five years had rendered familiar ; to continue the same routine existence, which was now something more than second nature ; to sit on the same stool, and to go on writing at the same desk, where I had already indited as many letters as might have filled a shelf in the British Museum ; of anything different from of anything better than this, my thought had taken no cognisance.

For, in good truth, had I been at once turned out of the office and into my legacy, I should have felt like the celebrated prisoner of the Bastille. My old occupation gone how could I in a moment have substituted another ? I had no friends. Those of my early manhood were dead, or married, or abroad. The old ladies who once invited me to tea-parties were dead and buried, and their pretty daughters were buxom wives, and had pretty daughters of their own to dispose of to young clerks, or any other eligible who might present himself.

My word ! though just in the first blush of the affair, it seemed a fine thing to have ten thousand pounds to whistle down the wind, I soon began to fear I should have small personal enjoyment out of it.

No person could imagine I found any especial gratification in settling the claims of Cathcart's tailor, or satisfying the tax-collector, who seemed to call about every other day on Thompson. I had known but little of my fellow-clerks, who, indeed, compared with myself, were mere birds of passage at the "Home and Foreign ;" and really, when I came to look at the matter dispassionately, as I did after that walk, when I felt quite young again, I did not see any

particular reason why I should ever know much more of them.

On the morrow I would send in my resignation. I quite made up my mind to that course ; and then ? Why, then I should have time to look about me, and to consider what step it would be better for me to take next.

When I arrived at my lodgings there sat young Allan waiting for me. This was another thing connected with the legacy that seemed objectionable. When I had no money, at least no one disturbed my privacy. After tea I could read for hours without a soul coming between me and my author. Now all that was changed. If my lodgings had been a club, or house of call, Barrigan and the rest could not have regarded them as more fully at their service.

"O, here you are at last," said Mr. Allan, rising as he spoke from the depth of my easy-chair, and holding out a hand which he had been warming before the glow of my fire. "Here you are ; I was half afraid I should be obliged to leave without seeing you, and I am so anxious to get your name down as one of the patrons of my lecture on the fifth of next month. I have got such a capital idea. It will please all the clergy, and the old ladies who have heaps of money. Ay, and it will draw the artisan class as well. I am going," he said, speaking very slowly and impressively, "to deliver a lecture at the Minerva Institute on this subject," and he presented me a bill that had evidently just been pulled (I have no doubt he had waited at the printing office while it was set up), which stated that on the fifth of April a lecture would be delivered at the Minerva Institute, Coster-square, by *Thomas William Allan, Esq., H. and F. I. O.*

"Under distinguished patronage.

"SUBJECT :

"IS MONEY CAPABLE OF CONFERRING HAPPINESS ?"

"The chair will be taken at half-past eight precisely by Sir Ahab Hardnail."

"Lord bless me !" I exclaimed. "How did you get old Hardnail ?"

"Well," he answered, and I am happy to say he blushed as he spoke, "I have not exactly got him yet, but I have no doubt he will come."

"I suppose this is a provisional sort of programme," I suggested.

"That is just it, Mr. Cheverley," agreed the boy, for he was little more, eagerly. "We have put it all down as we hope to carry it out. Do you understand?"

I told him I understood it perfectly; and he then produced his list of patrons, or, in other words, subscribers.

"Why, these are all Cathcart's people," I remarked. "Are they dummies too?"

"No; they are right enough. They have, every man and woman of them, either paid or promised to pay, and *their* word, you know, is as good as their bond."

I could not avoid wishing it were possible to believe the words of Messrs. Cathcart and Allan came under the same category; but I only said,

"It is very kind of Cathcart to interest himself about your lecture."

"Well, you see, the fact of the matter is, Cheverley,—you don't mind my calling you Cheverley, do you?"

Quite truthfully I told Mr. Allan it was immaterial what he called me; but I could not help reflecting that none of the "fresh blood" in the "Home and Foreign" introduced by the directors or owing their berths and salaries to some worldly circumstance totally unconnected with personal cleverness or merit, had ever before evinced any mad desire to address me familiarly.

Never until the advent of that wonderful legacy had I thought so little of myself. It was only when the world in which I then had my being came and worshipped my ten thousand pounds, that I realised how truly great was Mr. Amriott's money—how truly small Reuben Cheverley.

"The fact is," Allan went on saying, while I, on another line of rails, but still keeping him both within sight and sound, was thinking my own thoughts, "I owe Cathcart some money, a lot of money, and it is not pleasant owing money to a fellow one meets every day, and in one's own office too—now, is it?"

Never having had any experience of the sort, I could only answer that I should imagine it was not.

"I was sure you would say so, practical and matter-of-fact as you are," Mr. Allan proceeded. "Well, Cathcart, who really is a practical fellow in some things, though you might not think it—"

"Pardon me, but I do think it," I interrupted.

"Do you? Now that confirms what Cathcart said only this afternoon. He said, 'Cheverley is a deuced deal sharper fellow than you imagine.'"

"Very kind and complimentary of Cathcart. But pray proceed. You were telling me you owed him some money."

"Yes; and so this morning, as we were walking up to the 'bus—we live, you know, at Highgate—"

"Yes, yes," I answered, somewhat impatiently.

Allan was the most diffusive fellow in the office; and I had bought a copy of Charles Lamb's "Letters," edited by Talfourd, on my way home, which I was longing to open, since his letters, like his essays, are to me the most enjoyable ever written.

"He broke cover by saying, 'I can't help feeling, Allan, how confoundedly disagreeable it must be for you to meet me morning, noon, and night, and remember that trifle there is between us.'"

"He did not offer to write it off, I suppose," was my commentary, as the young fellow paused.

"No; *you* know he is hard up, or else *I* know he would never have mentioned the matter," said Allan, loyally. "To put the case in a nutshell, Mr. Cheverley," went on the lad, "he said he had been thinking of a plan which would help us both. I have a certain fluency of language, as you know," explained the unhappy youth; "and I have, since I was quite a boy" (I wonder how far beyond boyhood, except in loss of self-respect, he fancied he had travelled?), "been in the habit of writing little things, and reading them at first only among my friends, but afterwards to some private audiences. My uncle," he proceeded, finding I made no comment upon his literary genius, "is the proprietor of the *Eastshire Gazette*, and my cousin is now sub-editor of the *Modern Rambler*. There is a good deal about fishing in it," added Mr. Allan, by way of explanation.

"*You are quite a family of authors,*" I remarked.

"Well, don't you think," he said modestly, "that if one member of a family writes, it sets the others thinking about writing too? I have always been hearing my uncle praised up; and what a fine thing it is to have a newspaper; and I see my cousin sit down, with a pair of scissors and a gum-bottle and a pencil, and turn out an article as fast as a shot."

"To return to your own sheep," I suggested; for it seemed to me we were travelling far away from the lecture.

"Cathcart's sheep, rather," he answered. "To cut a long story short, then, he offered that if I would deliver a lecture he would get enough out of his own connection to defray the expenses, and something over. Cathcart really does know a lot of good people; so he asked for leave of absence this afternoon, and went round to all his acquaintances in the City, and got a heap of names; as he says, 'he can do anything for a friend.'"

"And then?" This as a mere hint for Mr. Allan to proceed.

"Why, then, the question arose as to where the lecture should be delivered. Cathcart and I as we walked home puzzled our brains to consider what it should be about. I thought that 'The Practical Effect of Insurance Companies on Family Life' might have been a taking title; but Cathcart said he did not think it would do, more especially as a friend we met, connected with the press, to whom we submitted the idea, asked if we did not mean Family Death, 'because if you do,' he said, 'it is a subject I am up in, and I can give you plenty of cheerful data which I am sure would delight your directors.' So at last, after Cathcart had suggested, and I said I could make nothing of his subjects, and I suggested and he said my subjects would not please the powers that be, I remarked, perhaps something might be made of an idea of which a clergyman delivered himself last Sunday week, 'Can money confer happiness?' The young ladies would like it, I went on.

"'Ay,' said Cathcart, 'the young ladies who want to marry Alonzo, though he has only fifty pounds a year, the while they think their fathers ought to work twice as hard as any nigger to give them evening dresses that may enable them to eclipse other young women. The young men who, cramped for money themselves, wonder how their governors

can have the heart to keep the purse-strings so tight. The old ladies, who have found money cannot make them young again ; and the old gentlemen, who would not be made young if the door back into the twenties could be opened for them only by a golden key. Every one, from Imogene, who, a year after marriage, will be regretting she did not accept old Jones instead of Alonzo, to old Jones, will approve of the sentiment. One of the shams of the age is our public depreciation of the god we all really worship. Go home and write your lecture, Allan, and pile it up strong, that, except as a means of doing good, money is rather an encumbrance than otherwise. Don't let any apparent discrepancy between your statements and your feelings stand in the way of your success. Remember, all worthy people require money for some purpose quite foreign to themselves. You, for instance, want it to repay me. I—but I need not bore you further. Recollect, however, even the clergyman last Sunday week sent round the bag."

"It seems a pity," I interrupted, "that Cathcart does not deliver the lecture himself."

"He could hardly do so, and tout for an audience ! besides, as he says, 'I have a few ideas, Allan, to which you are welcome, but I could never lick them into proper shape.' I do not quite agree with him there ; but still some persons have a certain facility of composition that others lack."

"Undoubtedly," I agreed. "But what in the world made you fix on Coster-square as the scene of operations?"

"We could not think of a suitable place, so we decided to ask Palmett's advice. He is a friend of Hardnail's, you know, and a precious old screw too ; but he is useful, very useful, and sometimes will give a helping hand, though not with any money in it, remember, if you ask his advice and flatter him up a bit. He lives at Muswell Hill ; so we walked over there and talked to him, and asked what he would recommend. We told him who was coming, of course, and the subject, as preliminaries."

"'With your subject,' he said, pouring out some more port, and pushing the decanter over to Cathcart, who only smiled and shook *his head*, and somehow managed to look as if *he had touched nothing stronger than tea* all his life. *'With your subject—and a very good subject it is, excel-*

lent : vanity of riches—"Vanity of vanities," saith the Preacher, and surely he ought to have known a good deal about the matter :—with your subject, as I was saying, you ought to go to Coster-square ; I'll speak to Hardnail about it : he is one of the committee. You can send me a few tickets for him to distribute among his friends. Of course you do not expect to fill any hall with money, and it had better be full than empty. Hardnail will, I fancy, see the matter as I see it. Science is all very well at these institutions ; but what can a shopkeeper want with science unless how to teach him the best way of adulterating his goods ? Something moral, and Christian, and practical is far better. There is too much discontent among the working classes—strikes, early closing movement, and so forth. They have got a notion into their heads that, because a man has five thousand a year, he is to be envied ; envied—while they, on eighteen shillings a week, and with no appearance to keep up, are always grumbling ! They forget their advantages, and fancy a millionaire must be of necessity happy. It is utter ignorance, of course ; but still it is a notion that wants to be dispelled. Money give happiness, indeed ! Why, I know a man worth a plum, sir, who can't digest a mutton chop—give you my word he can't, and look at those paving fellows, how they devour dry bread and fat bacon, and seem to think it the finest feast in the world."

"What an idiot Mr. Palmett must be !" I interposed.

"*Is he* ? I'll tell you what he did once. You know Holway ; cross beggar ! but that is nothing. Well, he had a young brother who started in business on his own account—I forget what the business was—and one day, while he was just contriving to hold his head above water, he had to pay a bill to Palmett that amounted to fifty-five pounds. I think it was fifty-five."

"Never mind, for Heaven's sake, whether it was fifty-five, or five hundred and fifty-five, but get on with your story," I entreated.

Allan looked at me with surprise, but proceeded placidly.

"I am sure it was fifty-five ; but, whatever it may have been, he gave double the amount he intended—that is, for instance, he gave ten ten-pound notes and a five, instead of eleven fives."

"*Very stupid mistake to make,*" I commented.

"Still, one that might have been made by any person. I remember myself——"

"O Allan!" I entreated, "do look at the clock, and recollect that, if you are able to sit up all night, and be at the office at nine in the morning, I am not."

"I am sure I beg your pardon; but I must just finish telling you about Palmett. The minute Holway found out the error he had committed, he ran round to Noble-street, and, all out of breath, told Palmett he believed he had handed him fifty pounds too much.

"'I am aware of that,' said Palmett. 'Let it be a lesson to you, young man, to be more careful in the future.'

"Holway said it would be a lesson to him, and waited for the fifty to be returned.

"Palmett resumed his writing.

"'Will you give me a cheque, sir, or the difference in cash?' asked Holway, when the silence had lasted for a little while.

"Palmett ceased writing, and wiped his pen carefully.

"'I will give you neither,' he said. 'You have bought your experience very cheaply—the loss of fifty pounds to-day may prove the saving of hundreds of thousands to you hereafter.'"

"The old scoundrel!" I exclaimed; "but of course Holway got back his money?"

"Of course he got nothing of the sort. He went to his solicitor, and his solicitor told him he had no remedy. I'd have had my remedy either out of his pocket or his body; but Holway did not thrash him, or give him in charge, or do anything. He just flung up his cards."

"Do you mean he killed himself?" I asked, aghast.

"O, no, he was too game for that; but the loss turned the scale so far against him—he was a poor man, in a very small way of business—that he made up his mind to struggle no more. 'If this is trade in London,' he said, 'I would rather deal among the opossums;' and so he worked his passage out to Australia, and is doing very well, I believe."

"What an unmitigated ruffian!" I exclaimed, referring to Mr. Palmett, the while I put down my name for half a dozen tickets.

"*It is very kind of you, Cheverley, very kind indeed,*"

said the young fellow, as I placed the amount, thirty shillings, in his hand; but I fancied he looked somewhat disappointed that it was not a five-pound note.

Having got, however, all he could decently ask for, if not all he desired, Mr. Allan said good-night, and left me at length alone with Charles Lamb. But, somehow or another, as I read, or rather tried to read, my thoughts strayed from the text; and I wondered what sort of essay Elia would have written on his last resting-place, had he in some spirit of prophecy been able to see his own neglected grave covered knee-deep with rank grass, stinging-nettles, and yarrow, while that of Dives, close beside, dwarfs the modest mound underneath which the frail body, where dwelt the tenderest heart, the kindest humour, the keenest wit, lies mouldering away to dust.

CHAPTER III.

IN COSTER-SQUARE.

THE night of Mr. Allan's lecture arrived; and true to those habits of punctuality which, rather than any genius I possessed, had raised my salary at the "Home and Foreign" Office to one hundred and fifty pounds a year, I arrived in Coster-square ten minutes before the time named on the programme.

It had been Allan's wish that I should accompany him to the scene of action, while Cathcart proposed calling for me, and Mr. Palmett actually looked in at the office, and after expressing the delight he felt in making my acquaintance, asked me to accept a seat in his brougham on the eventful night.

All very kind and complimentary no doubt; but either I was not such a fool as they took me for, or else that shadow, Suspicion, which of necessity dogs wealth a man has not possessed from his birth, had stolen closer upon my footsteps and made all human motives and actions seem darker to me than they had done in the days when—well, to be quite explicit, in the days when Allan would have *laughed outright* at the bare idea of cultivating "old

Cheverley," and Cathcart and Mr. Palmett and all their set would have seen me at Jericho before proffering the smallest attention or civility.

Further, my eyes were quite opened to the natures or my young associates. Thoughtless they might be; indeed, I knew they were, about every matter on which thoughtlessness was least desirable; but in addition to this, which I could easily have pardoned—had pardoned, indeed, and excused times without number—they were thoughtful where want of thought could only have been regarded as natural and graceful. Before me they took no pains to conceal the two faces which they turned, one to their own world—the other to their relations. Despite Cathcart's remark anent my sharpness, they evidently considered I was not clever enough to put this and that together; and that their follies, their schemes, their shifts, their falsehoods, their double dealing, their pretensions, their sins, had no meaning for the old fogey who, after spending his whole life in a shell, was trying to accustom his bleared eyes to the wicked sights of a world hitherto beyond his knowledge.

Heaven knows I was no happier for the spectacle. I would not have seen could I have helped doing so.

Being unable to remain blind, I declined the civilities of Messrs. Allan, Cathcart, and Palmett, even to the extent of refusing to sup up with a select little party after it was quite settled money could do little or nothing for a man, and so wended my way Coster-square-ward in my usual lonely fashion.

I had given back five of my tickets to Allan—what did I, who knew nor man nor woman in the slightest degree likely to enjoy the young fellow's eloquence, want with them?—and therefore took my seat amongst total strangers in the very front row of the audience. Natural modesty might have led me to select a less conspicuous position, but greatness in many ways had of late been thrust upon me, and I bowed my head even under this latest unexpected chastisement.

Just as I entered, Cathcart appeared, bustling about in a great state of excitement.

"You must come on the platform," he exclaimed. "It is all nonsense your sitting down there amongst the audience. I will take no refusal. Come with me."

"Not even in charge of a police-officer," I answered with unwonted courage. "I would rather go to Bow-street than venture among your 'great guns.' No, Cathcart," for he was still detaining me, "I am quite serious—you must believe me, please."

"Well, wilful man, you will have your way, I suppose," answered Cathcart, laughing; but he made me of as much importance as possible, marshalling me with great ceremony up the hall and across the space in front of the platform, to a chair beside one occupied by a pleasant, motherly-looking lady, very plainly dressed, with whom he shook hands.

As he passed back again along the front row, he nodded to a gentleman who came quietly in quite unheeded and unattended, a man with a strangely grave face, of whom I took especial notice, both because of his face and of his appearing in evening dress, a delicate attention none of the Palmett and Hardnail clique, except Allan and Cathcart, paid to the audience.

For me, I had never possessed a dress-suit in all my life; and I now presented myself to the gaze of the Minerva Institute arrayed in my Sunday frock-coat, black trousers, black vest, black necktie, hair watch-chain, a spare, uninviting-looking, elderly personage.

Not so spare, however, as the stranger—not quite so plain either, perhaps. He was not ugly. I felt myself looking past my comely neighbour at him. There was nothing offensive or repulsive or hateful about his appearance, as there was to my eye about some of the people who now began to occupy the platform; but he was curious-looking and ungainly. Yes, that is the word, ungainly; lean, spare, taller than myself, with long, bony hands—I could see that, as he slowly pulled on his right hand glove—large feet encased in patent leather boots; joints that seemed more prominent than joints usually are; and shoulder-blades that were gradually wearing a white mark on the back of his superfine coat. I felt fascinated by the man's appearance. I had never seen any one in the slightest degree resembling him before. He seemed another type of being to those amongst whom I had *hitherto been thrown*. His face was very long, and there *were queer lines and hollows strewn about it that might*

have been comical, but that somehow they were sad. No one feature was out of proportion to the other features ; but yet nose, chin, upper lip, all had the effect of being misfits. His forehead might have been satisfactory had the bumps of perception and casuality not been out of all keeping with the size of his other organs ; his cheek-bones were somewhat prominent, his ears, large and flat, were not obtrusive, but things to marvel at when attention was drawn to them. He wore his hair cropped very short, a fashion not so usual then as it is now, and parted down the middle, which, in those days, was thought foolish, and even wicked ; considered east of Temple Bar to be the evidence of a fool, a fop, a milksop, a military swell, and many other things abhorrent to the City mind.

What could he be ? Whence could he have come ? Had I been sitting in a West-end theatre, or in any place of instruction or amusement adjoining those localities where leisure dwells and Pleasure disports herself, I might, like Charles Lamb, have hazarded a " wide solution " concerning his calling and antecedents. But here in Coster-square, surrounded only by Cathcart's friends and the local shopkeepers and artisans, for whose behalf Sir Ahab Hardnail, and others of that ilk, had " got up " the Literary Institute, it was as impossible for me to assign him a place in the social scale as it proved for Elia to conjecture the rental value of all the retail shops in London. Truth to tell, I was *very* ignorant of a world in which I had spent over half a century. Almost any crossing-sweeper knew more of life than I.

At the " Home and Foreign " we did not see much to enlarge the borders of our experience. The City men, who constituted the larger portion of our directors, and the country and West-end professional men who came as agents, or to introduce business, really comprised all the " society " we ever beheld. Ours was not an office to which all ranks and classes frantically rushed with the intention of securing exceptional advantages. That sort of business we left to the " Progress," and other newly-fledged bantlings. Our terms were high, and our business special. " Greenland's icy mountains " presented *no more difficulties* to us than " India's coral strand." We were quite as ready to take a *life resident near " Afric's sunny fountains "* as to risk the

insidious effects of the "spicy breezes" blowing "soft o'er Ceylon's isle;" but we required to be remarkably well paid for doing so. That was our speciality—I mean the foreign insurance business, the being well paid forming, of course, a part and parcel of it; and so it had chanced that my observation of men had lain rather amongst intending emigrants, energetic travellers, officers ordered to foreign service, captains about to go down to the sea in ships, and other such folk, than alongside elegant leisure, or the affectation of it, which may any day be seen walking on the sunny side of Pall Mall, or lounging as near the shop windows in Regent-street as the views and exigencies of other loungers will permit.

For this reason I could make nothing of the gentleman in evening dress—nothing whatever. During the course of the proceedings I never saw him smile, never save once, and that certainly was not because of any witty remark made by the lecturer. Had Allan been preaching a sermon, that one auditor could not have listened with a graver or sadder face. Evidently the whole affair struck him as a very serious matter indeed. Even the prospect of it so subdued his spirits that, when the room was laughing at a drunken artisan, guffawing outright or tittering behind its handkerchiefs, his features merely relaxed into a smile, which struck me as more solemn and suggestive than his previous immobility. At public gatherings, as in church, small absurdities strike one as eminently ridiculous; and before Allan ever appeared on the platform we had all, the grave individual excepted, laughed our fill, and were quite prepared to receive Sir Ahab Hardnail and his *protégé* with effusion.

As befitted an institute established for the benefit of the dwellers round and about Coster Square, the space devoted to "the stalls" was extremely small; and even that space was jostled to right and left in quite a democratic style by the benches assigned to the holders of what, for want of a better term, I must call second-class tickets.

Of course, there was a lower depth still, filled, free of charge, with such of the aboriginal inhabitants as were friendly with the shopkeepers, or in favour with the local clergy.

Shortly after my entrance, a respectable grocer, for

some reason—perhaps because he could not help himself—came sneaking along the side benches to a place almost at right angles with the front row, where I sat. Clinging to his arm was an individual, whom I afterwards understood to be a foreman moulder, dressed in decent black, but grimy as regarded his hands, and uncertain both in gait and utterance.

Subdued at first by the lights and the sight of the assemblage, he remained, for a few minutes after taking his seat, quiet; then, possessed by that desire of appearing quite sober which attends semi-drunkenness, he nudged his companion, and asked, in an audible whisper,

“What itch ’l ’bout?”

All our eyes were at once directed towards the man who propounded this question.

“Hush!” answered his friend.

“But what itch ’l ’bout?” he repeated more earnestly; “is’t moosk, or play’n, or wat?”

“Lecture,” explained the sober and respectable shop-keeper.

“Lec—! what’s lec? what itch ’bout?”

“Perhaps you would like to look at a programme, sir,” observed a young clerk at this juncture, leaning forward and offering one of Mr. Allan’s wordy circulars for perusal. After that he folded his arms across his chest, and looked down with a satisfied smile. He was one of Hardnail’s clerks, and as great a prig in work and out of it as ever breathed.

By this time the moulder had secured the programme, and was endeavouring to read it upside down. Failing to accomplish this, he turned for information to his friend.

“Wha’ itch going to be—singin’—tight-rope—wat?”

“Lecture—lecture—lecture; do hold your tongue,” said the grocer in an impatient whisper.

“The subject, sir, of the lecture,” remarked Hardnail’s clerk with a bland smile, “you will perceive to be, ‘Is money capable of conferring happiness?’ Young Mr. Allan, of the Home and Foreign Insurance Company, is the lecturer.” Having finished which statement, the prig looked round for approval.

“Is money—” repeated the moulder thickly but audibly, *fumbling the programme the while.*

"Capable of conferring happiness ?" finished the clerk with an air.

"Why o' course tis," said the other. "If **any** feller say tain't, he must be a damn'd fool."

There was a laugh and a titter; a coster in the background shouted "Engore;" and then made a feint of wiping his lips as if after drinking a pot of beer. The men grinned unrestrainedly; the women put up their handkerchiefs and giggled decorously behind them. Even the prig was fain for a moment to cover his clean-shaved mouth, after-which he coughed apologetically.

As for the grocer, he was too much ashamed to do anything, save turn very red; and affairs were in this position when the lady to my right rose valiantly and attempted a rescue. With the pluck of thirty, and the determination of sixty, she crossed the few feet which intervened between the stalls and benches, and said:

"My good friend, had you not better go home?"

The man looked at her in blank amazement.

"'Ome—vy 'ome?" he asked.

"You are not in a state to be benefited by anything you may hear in this building. Don't you agree with me?" addressing his friend.

"No, mum, I don't," retorted the grocer, who regarded this expostulation as an infringement upon the rights of people. "If he's only let alone, he'll let alone. Won't you, Bill?"

"O yes. I'm orl right," agreed Bill, as distinctly as he was able to speak.

"He'll behave well enough, ma'am," volunteered a quiet-looking man with a hectic flush, whom I found afterwards was a packing-case maker on a small scale in the neighbourhood.

"You must overlook his vigorous Saxon," deferentially suggested Hardnail's prig, recognising in the lady one of the Palmett connection.

"Ne'er a quieter fellow goin' nor Bill," said a coffee-house keeper, looking round the audience for confirmation of his statement.

The elderly lady wavered. "If I knew where you lived," she began, addressing the popular Bill, "I should like to *call and give you—*"

At this point something remarkable occurred. Digging his left elbow well into his friend's right side, Bill, in a stage aside, delivered himself of this sentence :

"I say, old fellow, she's 'ansom, though not young—she ain't young, but she's 'ansom." And then he winked at us all solemnly, as if some enormous joke were in progress.

Then it was that I saw a smile flicker round the lips of the man who had puzzled me ; and while some friend whispered the elderly lady to resume her seat, a loud clapping of hands and burst of applause greeted Mr. Allan, who, accompanied by his party, now appeared upon the platform

"Attention, Bill," whispered the grocer, giving Bill an audible thump in the back.

"Orl right," agreed Bill, and then fell asleep as calmly and satisfactorily as if he had drunk his orthodox bottle of port and been sitting with feet outstretched before a sea-coal fire.

The reader must excuse my not giving a detailed account of Allan's lecture. As lectures go, it was not bad ; as lectures are, the young fellow did not acquit himself much amiss ; but lectures being forms of entertainment as much out of my line as orreries, magic lanterns, dioramas, and other exhibitions of the same moral kind, I confess that more than once I found myself longing for the easy-chair and the bright fire-light, the familiar book, and the happy solitude of my bachelor lodging.

Whether if I had not been behind the scenes, I might have liked the lecture any better, I cannot say ; but, as it was, the arguments Allan adduced to prove that money might generally be regarded as an unmitigated evil struck me as eminently unsatisfactory. Like Bill, I, who had known the want of money, felt that the man capable of imagining it could not confer happiness must be a—fool.

Perhaps Bill's summary of the argument impressed me more than the lecture. Anyhow, though I ought, I am certain, to have been convinced the hind was really better off than the peer, I found myself deciding that after all the peer should be, if he were not, in the happier case.

According to the lecturer, money only brought with it care, anxiety and responsibility ; if it did not bring sin too, it was only *by the grace of God and the exceptional virtue of the man who owned it.*

How much less harass, for instance, dogged the steps of the person who, having nothing to invest, need dread no wars, no panics, no swindles ! "Certain as the Saturday night," said Allan, "is his money. So long as his employer can hold his head above water, the weekly wage or the quarterly salary, must be forthcoming. When his employer drowns, when the waters have gone over him, when the place which knew him once so well knows him no longer, how fares it with cook, gardener, coachman, clerk ? Why, they all go to some other employer still prosperous, still solvent, and again receive the wages they have earned with the regularity of a Government annuity.

"At the world's banquet the poor are the guests, the rich the hosts. Over and over again we read of men who count their income by tens and hundreds a day, dining off a chop, which they wash down with cold water. They provide fine carriages for their wives, but they themselves go on foot. When they travel, they affect from choice the class we, who are not wealthy, select from necessity. They have seen all that is under the sun, and, finding greatness vanity, revert to littleness."

So, at considerable length, the young fellow proceeded—quoting examples of miserly rich men who believed they were paupers ; of careful rich men ruined by extravagant sons ; of fond rich fathers whose daughters served them the scurvy trick of running off with penniless adventurers, as the daughters of over-fond and wealthy fathers will ; of industrious rich men, who, having risen by dint of hard work, laboured on till softening of the brain ended all power of work for ever. It was like a medical lecture in which all the disease is brought forward, and all the health suppressed. But the audience listened, and the Hardnails and Palmetts murmured a plaintive assent, and the porters and costers cheered, one half of them because they thought it the right thing to do, and the other half because it was borne in upon them that "rich men might have their troubles too, Heaven be thanked ;" while the cheesemongers and the grocers and cabinet-makers listened attentively, trying to make sense out of it all, and wondering where, in the division of classes, they and their hard work, and their struggling Saturday nights, and the unpaid bills, Hardnail *and the like* would "look into and send on," belonged.

A very curious and difficult problem, believe me, ladies and gentlemen, and one not quite to be solved by Mr. Allan or any superficial observer.

"There are cases, however," proceeded the lecturer, "when wealth comes as a sudden snare and temptation to a man. When, after a life of the most grinding economy, he suddenly wakes and finds that he need be economical never again. Is that no lure of the devil, think you, my friends? Is the Evil One, then, baiting no trap for the man's soul? You may have known one hitherto generous and sympathetic—one to whom you were dear as Damon to Pythias, as David to Jonathan—changed in the twinkling of an eye by the favours of Fortune.

"Time was when he would have shared with you his last sixpence, his hardly-earned crust. But now? Look around, and who in any rank has not had some friend spoiled by a sudden shower of gold—seen some kind face changed by the sunshine of prosperity? Let me tell you a story, friends—a little trumpery story, about a small child, a kinsman of my own." (O, Allan!)

"He was a naughty little chap, as boys are wont to be—a restive, restless, brown-eyed, curly-headed, active-limbed, strong-voiced young Turk; a very demon amongst pastry, the terror of his nurses, the apple of their eye (as the Scripture beautifully expresses anything very near and dear) to father and mother.

"Well, one night there was a meeting at his father's house—of good serious people—men and women, who had the well-being of the nation at heart; who desired to see the people drink less and pray more; go to public worship often, and to the public-house seldom." (Enormous applause, led by the Hardnails and the local clergy, and seconded ably by the rank and file in the background.)

"It was a serious gathering, one at which a child's presence and a child's pranks were as much out of place as it is ever possible for a child's doings to prove." (Renewed applause, for Mr. Allan was evidently warming to his subject.) "Like a judicious mother, as she is," proceeded the lecturer, "Charlie (we will call him Charlie, if you please)—Charlie's maternal parent, after a time, told him he must go to bed. Liking the society, Charlie demurred. The mother was firm, and the father firmer;

and at last Charlie—the nurse being rung for—understood he had no choice in the matter. But, though he submitted, he was rebellious.

“‘I’ll go to bed,’ he said, kicking imaginary sand before him as he made his exit; ‘*but I won’t say my prayers.*’”

The wildest applause followed this statement. Whether the audience were glad that Charlie refused to say his prayers, whether they approved the mode in which Allan told the story, or whether they were simply tired to death, and glad to make a noise on any pretence, I cannot say. Sufficient to say they did applaud to the echo, thereby enabling Allan, as time was getting on, to skip a few descriptive paragraphs, which certainly would not have added to the effect of his narrative.

“You must suppose now, if you please,” he went on, after bowing his acknowledgments, “that some little time—say, a quarter of an hour—has elapsed. The important questions of the meeting are being discussed; from all minds save the mother’s—ah, your hearts are with her—the memory of the naughty child is dismissed; what some may consider wider interests than the future of the curly-headed boy have ousted the recollection of his very existence, for the time being, off the stage. Bound to her guests, tied by *les convenances*, the poor mother cannot run upstairs to see how it fares with the little sinner. All at once a silence falls upon those who are so seated as to command a view of the door. The handle has been gently turned, then the door opens a little, and the owner of a curly head peeps in. No one speaks to Charlie. He fails to meet his mother’s eye, so he pushes the door open wider, and stands in the entrance, flushed, eager, and yet shy—a tiny figure, with tumbled hair, and bare feet, arrayed in white, just risen from his cot! For a second or two he remained silent; but he had his errand, and he must be rid of it.

“‘Ma!’ cried out the sweet, shrill, childish voice, and at that sound his mother turned, and from the other end of the room saw her naughty little boy, the observed of all present.

“Unable to imagine what fresh freak of perverseness *had brought him downstairs*, she advanced towards the

door, exclaiming, 'O, Charlie, how could you!' but Charlie interrupted.

"Ma, I have said my prayers,' he began; then added gleefully, 'Isn't that a sell for Satan?'"

There were persons present who objected to Satan's name being publicly mentioned even in a sermon, but their dry coughs of disapproval were drowned by the din of applause which arose from the back and side benches. Even in the more select circles there were those who smiled a half-protesting smile, and my plump and kindly-looking neighbour said audibly, "Poor dear little creature!"

"I will not," went on Allan, "detain you five minutes longer; but before we separate I want to tell you of a parallel case, in which the disappointment to the Prince of Darkness must have been equally great. Not so very long ago there lived in this huge, overgrown city of ours, a man, no longer in his first youth, who from boyhood had filled a clerk's place, and received a clerk's salary. Summer and winter, spring and autumn, found him sitting at his accustomed desk—a man to be depended on, a man accurate in his work, faithful to his employers, a good servant to his Maker. He had no home-ties, death long before had severed them; he had few friends, for he was not well off, and even friendship—except on a desert island—necessitates the possession of some ready cash. Unexpectedly he was left a fortune—not a princely fortune perhaps, but one which must have seemed so to him, and proved to most men an enormous temptation, a very lion in his path.

"Should you have blamed a man who had lived solitary for half a century, saying, 'While I was poor the world neglected me; now I will neglect the world; I will take to hoarding; I will put my money out at usury; I will double, treble, quadruple this legacy, and then in my own fashion enjoy myself'? I confess, under the circumstances, I should have regarded such a determination as natural in the extreme. Quite reasonably—so it seems to me—this man might have said to himself, 'Hitherto my life has been a fast; now will I feast; I will eat, I will drink, I will be merry, I will sleep softly, and take mine ease. Those who are sick and those who are sorry, those who are poor and footsore and heavy-hearted, may plod along their weary way, but for me there is rest at last; and in the sunshine

of this late prosperity I will bask and lie at ease, regardless of the sobs and tears, the anguished prayers, and the bitter lamentations which rise above all the noise and clamour of our daily life, and are heard only by the angels in heaven.'"

Thunders of applause. It struck me there must be some fogleman amongst the audience, so accurately did the clapping succeed to Allan's pauses, so certainly did the cheering follow a particular intonation in Allan's voice.

"I have told you," resumed the lecturer, "what this man might have done without blame or rebuke from his fellows. I will now tell you what he did. He kept on his former road, still content with the few worldly pleasures, with the modest fare of the days when he was poor. But he had his resources, he indulged in his luxuries for all that. Wherever a human being had need, and he heard of that need, he stepped forward to help. What he denied himself he gave freely to others. Was some one suffering for a boyish folly, he held out a hand to bring him to shore. Was a man with a family in fearful need, he appeared a very saviour in time of cruel extremity. Why multiply instances? What I have said will indicate my meaning. Often, too often, as money proves a curse rather than a blessing, a misfortune instead of a gift direct from Heaven, there are cases when it is capable of conferring happiness upon its possessor and those with whom he shares his possessions. Like everything else, it may be used or abused; it may put leaden weights on his feet that can only drag a man down to perdition, or wings to his shoulders which shall carry him beyond the skies. Would it were possible for me to say money was generally used as a power for good! Alas, and alas, I cannot do so! Few, indeed, are the instances in which, after the bait has been laid and the trap set, a man is able triumphantly to walk away, with his head erect, his soul confident—away from the lures of the Evil One, having achieved, indeed, in the guileless slang of little Charlie, a 'sell for Satan.'"

Having in his own person achieved which graceful peroration, Mr. Allan bowed to the audience, who rent the roof with their plaudits. Then Sir Ahab Hardnail *proposed a vote of thanks*, which, after being seconded, was

duly carried and cheered vociferously. Then there was a good deal of bustle and handshaking, and putting on of mantles and shawls, and driving off in broughams and flies and cabs; and somehow or another, having shaken off Cathcart and got rid of Allan and Sir Ahab Hardnail and my genial neighbour, who had been once again complimented upon her good looks by the moulder before his friends carried him away almost *vi et armis*, I found myself standing on the steps of the lecture-hall, looking out disconsolately at a drizzling rain which was coming down with a good even persistency that promised no abatement for several hours at all events.

Like most men who have had to cut their coats according to their cloth, and to appear fairly well dressed on very limited means, I had learned to hate rain with a hatred which was actually loathing. True, I could now afford to contemplate the prospect of having my best clothes ruined with comparative equanimity, but the habits of nigh upon half a century cannot be cast aside in a moment; and I was looking ruefully at the steady downfall, when some one accosted me with the words,

"Have you not an umbrella, sir?"

I turned at the question, and met the eyes of the man who had so puzzled me, and who smiled as I answered,

"Lost it; for the first time in twenty-five years left it in an omnibus."

"Our way lies in the same direction," he said, "and I shall be happy to give you a share of my gamp, at all events till we reach a cabstand. It is not an article which can lay any claim to beauty of construction or richness of material, but it is steadfast. Time was when I was always losing umbrellas (the money I have spent upon them, if it could be capitalised, would prove a provision for my old age); but at last I invested in this gingham and it has stuck to me. I cannot lose it! It won't be lost. I have forgotten it in railways, left it in cabs, lent it to friends, mislaid it in offices, but it invariably comes back to me. I believe it walks home. Well, and what did you think of the lecture on the vanity of riches?"

"O, it wasn't so bad!" I answered.

"Exactly; it wasn't so bad," he agreed. "I should say the young gentleman understood his audience pretty

thoroughly ; at least that portion of his audience he wished to please."

No original remark occurring to me in reply, we walked on for a few yards in silence, which was broken by my companion.

"What a most *apropos*-of-nothing story that was he dragged in by the head and shoulders."

"You mean about his curly-headed relation?"

"Yes ; he intended it, I suppose, to point the moral and adorn the tale of his good philanthropist."

"Very likely," I said, feeling I was growing extremely hot.

"By the way, you, if I am not mistaken, must be the gentleman who 'sold Satan.'"

"As Mr. Allan was good enough to put it."

"Precisely, as Mr. Allan was good enough to put it. Somebody left you ten thousand pounds, I believe. Pardon me if I seem impertinent, but I have heard your affairs pretty freely canvassed."

"You must have done," I thought ; but I only said "A relative had left me a legacy amounting to that sum."

"I wish any relative would leave me ten thousand pounds," he remarked.

"What would you do with it?" I asked.

"What would I do with it!" he repeated ; "that is easily told. I would sink enough in a Government annuity to make me feel certain I could never come on the parish ; invest against a pecuniary rainy day, as I invested in this gamp against actual rainy days, and then *I would have my fling*. By Jove, wouldn't I ! If the money only lasted three months, two months, one, I would have the full value out of it. I have never had my fling yet, as child, or boy, or man ; and if you consider," he added, suddenly changing his tone, "it is singular to reflect how many children, boys, and men, are in like case."

"Most, I should say," was my answer.

"So I should say," he agreed. "And seeing you were one of that majority," he continued, almost without a pause, "knowing you must have experienced the pains and penalties of short means, I wonder, I confess I do wonder, that now when you might have your innings out of life you *do not take them*, instead of wasting your substance among fellows like Messrs. Allan et Cie."

"Have you any enmity against Allan?" I asked, putting aside his comments on myself.

"Certainly not: I have no enmity against any living man. As regards the embryo lecturer, I sat out his farrago of nonsense to-night in order to do him a good turn. It would have been far pleasanter, and more profitable too, for me to have gone instead to Covent Garden, and heard that delicious little warbler, Lemberg."

"What!" I cried, "do you know her?"

"Only as one of the sweetest singers I ever heard. Do you know her?"

"I used to do so, long ago, before she made her fame."

"Ah, well, that need not have been very long ago. She has not lost much time in making *her* mark."

"You said something about doing Allan a good turn," I suggested, partly out of curiosity, partly because the Lemberg was not a subject on which I desired to enlarge. "Might I ask in what way you purpose to serve him?"

"I mean to puff him," was the calm reply. "I was there for that sole purpose. If I were in my own person to make a series of solemn affidavits to the Hardnails and Palmett bigwigs that I considered Thomas William Allan the cleverest lecturer that ever lived, not a man of the lot would attach the slightest importance to my observations; but let me say a few pleasant things in print, let Sir Ahab see the young fellow's name in his daily newspaper, Palmett find an account of his utterances in the *Financial Humbug*, and Lady Hardnail and the maiden Palmetts read a glowing criticism of this night's work in the *Little Bethel Magazine*, and the *Temperance Guardian*, and you shall see what you shall see."

"Are you a writer, then?" I inquired.

"I follow that calling," he answered.

"Should you think me impertinent if I asked your name?"

"Not in the least. I am known among my fellow-labourers as Smith—John Smith; you have heard that name before; I daresay it strikes you as somewhat familiar. To save all trouble, however, I may tell you at once, I was not at Balaclava; nobody belonging to me fought at Culloden, or *Waterloo*, or *St. Jean d'Acre*; the Smith, *Smyth*, or *Smeeth*, who distinguished himself in China, or

was hung for mutiny on the high seas, or rigged the Stock Exchange, or robbed the Bank of England, could claim nor kith nor kin with me. I am my own Smith, I am a Smith to myself, and a family in myself."

"I am glad you are going to say a good word for Allan," I remarked.

"I am going to say a great many more good words for him than he deserves," was the reply; "when you read the notices, which he will show to all his friends, pray remember that in my heart I think his philosophy the very worst possible: his theory as bad as his English. At all events, Mr. Cheverley, before you hasten to disembarass yourself of all your recently acquired wealth, before you throw your money to those sad dogs Allan and Cathcart and Barrigan, and the rest of that clique, consider how extremely difficult riches, when they have once made to themselves wings, are to lure back again. Never forget the old verse, which has such a deal of sound sense in its jingle:

'Tis a very good world that we live in,
To spend, or to lend, or to give in;
But to borrow or beg, or to ask for your own,
'Tis the very worst world that ever was known.'

If I were you, I would cut the 'Home and Foreign.'"

"I have already sent in my resignation," I answered, wondering in my heart why I was so frank to this extremely free-and-easy stranger.

"Indeed! And then?"

"I have some thoughts of buying a little place in the country," I explained.

"You will like that, I am sure," he said, with the bitterness which underlay every sentence he uttered. "Among the daisies and buttercups all the women are virtuous, and all the men honest. See," he went on, "the gamp and I have brought you safe to your own door; so now good-night."

"May I not hope to have the pleasure of knowing more of you?" I ventured; for somehow my heart had gone out towards this sad-faced, whimsical man. "I should be very glad if you would give me the opportunity of cultivating your acquaintance. Will you?"

"Well, no," he answered, slowly; "you are very kind, but, you see, the fact is I have one patron already, and at *present I feel he is as much as I can do with.*"

CHAPTER IV.

ARCADIA.

AFTER all, some time elapsed before I found a place amongst the daisies and the buttercups just to my mind.

For still the vision of daisies and buttercups was perpetually recurring to me. Moreover, the phrase, as thus rendered by Mr. John Smith, stuck to my memory, for the simple reason, I suppose, that it reversed the reading of my boyhood. "Buttercups and daisies"—that was it. I had not heard the three words joined together for over forty years, until he said, "daisies and buttercups."

Well-a-day, there is to some minds a delight in daisies and buttercups unintelligible to the comprehension even of those who dwell amongst them!

As I have said, the home I required did not immediately present itself. I visited many strange localities. I answered various advertisements. I had interviews with not a few owners and their solicitors before I purchased the little freehold at Reedbourne. No one assisted me in my search; amongst my "new set" there was a wonderful unanimity of opinion concerning the folly of my desires. Even our directors condescended to caution me against the gratification of my pet whim.

"Pooh, pooh!" said one, "don't do it. I tried the country and got sick of it. The butter was bad. Milk not to be had. Eggs laid by our hens cost me half-a-guinea a dozen, and cabbages sixpence apiece. In season or out of season, believe me, there is no place like London."

"You may talk of your country, Mr. Cheverley," remarked another, as if, indeed, I owned the whole of rural England, and made my possessions an unceasing theme of conversation, "but, believe me, it is all a delusion—a complete sham. The world has grown too old for that sort of thing. It is very well for bucolic squires, who must remain on the paternal acres or else starve, to speak of the pleasures of dewy meads, and so forth. Dewy meads mean rheumatism, my good sir. June roses are never seen to perfection out of Covent Garden. Newly-mown grass proves usually the precursor of hay fever; while as for strawberries, I can buy

them better and cheaper (and, moreover, just as I want them) at Moses', in Gracechurch Street, than you could ever hope to grow them."

"If you must leave London, why not go abroad?" suggested another representative of a class. "Never been abroad? That is the very reason you ought to go now. Know nothing of the language conversationally? Why, that is the very fun of travelling in 'foreign parts'! You will come back a new man. Every one should go abroad, if only to free himself from insular prejudices."

"It seems to me," I ventured, "that most people go abroad in order to make donkeys of themselves when they come back. For my part, I would just as soon listen to the braying of a brass band as to the babble of English tourists fresh from 'doing the Continent.'"

"Ah! but that is an exceptional class of tourist."

"Pardon me if I say I think it is the usual. It seems to me that conversation in England would, for six months in the year, collapse if people were unable to ask, 'Are you going to Florence?' 'Have you been to Venice?' 'Don't you think, after all, Vienna is the capital to see?' and so on *ad infinitum*."

"But you are so satirical, Mr. Cheverley!"

Satirical! Good Heavens! I should like to have seen the human being who, twelve months previously, had ventured to suggest Reuben Cheverley owned a soul to be saved, if its salvation crossed the whims of his principals, much less a turn for satire, which, indeed, is no virtue or failing of mine. I see many things which seem to escape the notice of my cleverer and busier neighbours, and ponder upon them; and now when I comment upon what has passed under my nose people say, "You are so observant, or so satirical, or so severe," or something else equally erroneous. They never found out I was anything but a nervous, elderly, poor clerk, until Mr. Amriott remembered me in his will.

Amongst all the people who talked to me concerning my project of buying a little place in the country, only one commended the idea. This was a former director, a Mr. Granton. He had always spoken a pleasant word to me *when he came to the office*, always been courteous, always *wished me a happy New Year*, and as time sped by some-

times even paused for a minute by my desk to say a few sentences which were grateful to a lonely man.

After I had left the "Home and Foreign" for good, I was standing one day by a bookstall when he accosted me.

"I am glad to see you," he said, "and to be able to offer my congratulations on your good fortune. Hardnail told me about the legacy some time since, and the next time I chanced to call at the office I found you gone. I should think you must have had enough of that desk and stool; I am truly glad you are out of harness at last."

"It was the last thing I ever expected to be," was my reply. "Even yet I can scarcely realise that I am a gentleman at large. Often when I stop to look at something in the street, or stand as I was doing when you spoke to me, I think suddenly, 'I must get back to the office—I must walk fast to make up for lost time.'"

"'As the hand of the dyer,'" quoted Mr. Granton, kindly, "but even that can assimilate itself to something else; and ere long you will forget the pulling against the collar and the drudgery of years, and learn how enjoyable a thing complete idleness, after a life of toil, may be."

"Ay, if a man possess any of the arts of idleness."

"Which you do, I presume—friends, for instance."

"I have not any," I answered, "except these," pointing towards the old and well-thumbed books I had been poring over.

"All the better: they will never disappoint you; a man who is fond of reading must indeed be at odds with circumstance if he cannot find on his bookshelves one good friend to talk to."

"Books have kept me company through many a winter's evening that must otherwise have been dull and lonely," I answered. "Now I am going to try adding another inanimate friend who will sympathise with my pleasures. Nature. I think of taking a place in the country, though every one says I shall repent the step."

"If you mind not merely what *every* one, but what *any* one says, you will do very little that is agreeable to yourself. For the happy or the unhappy, I believe there is no place like the country. Whenever I feel that the world and the people in it are not precisely all I could wish, I run

gentlemen and others requiring a small compact with land, near the Metropolis.—Mr. Twiner (of Twiner, Turner, & Round) is favoured with lots from the Executrix of the late Josiah Turtle, by auction (unless sold in the interim), at the House Yard, on Thursday, July 1st, at one o'clock a most desirable freehold property, situate about from Reedbourne Station, on the S.W.R., from which frequent railway communication with London. comprises a brick-built residence, of pleasing elevations, picturesque exterior, containing two reception and parlours, kitchen, scullery, dairy, and the usual domestic offices.

The outbuildings consist of excellent two-stall stable, cow-house, large barn, wood-house, brew-house, and are extremely compact in their arrangement. There is a large garden, stocked with the finest fruit-trees; the land is laid down in grass. The water is supplied from a well of crystal purity. Having been in the occupation of the owner for over fourteen years, the place is in a state of order and cultivation. There are several public houses in the neighbourhood; a post-office is close at hand, and provisions of all kinds are cheap and abundant. Hounds are within easy distance, and on the whole, the property is a most desirable one.

Messrs. Twiner, Turner, & Round, Auctioneers, House and Estate Agents, Trafalgar Square, London."

Despite its pretentiousness, there were two things I liked about this description of the late Mr. Turtle's residence. One, the house was evidently small; the other, the advertisement made no mention of "grounds," a species of out-of-door decoration for which I entertain an utter abhorrence.

There was something also suggestive about the very name of the village—Reedbourne. Some of my rare holidays had been spent wandering beside the Thames, or dreaming on the banks of that long stretch of water belonging to the Conservators of the River Wey, which is so much less like a canal than like a currentless river tracing back to Lethe itself; and as I perused the advertisement again, the babbling sound of distant weirs, and the soft sighing of the rushes, as the light breeze swayed them to and fro, sounded in my ears.

"I will go and hear what they want for the place by private contract," I decided, "and, if the price be near my limit, get an 'order to view.'"

Forthwith accordingly I repaired to Mr. Turtle's offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The price was considerably beyond the limit I had mentally decided upon; nevertheless, knowing the wide difference that often exists between the amount asked and the sum ultimately taken, I obtained a piece of paper on which was written, "Please allow the bearer, Mr. Cheverley, to view The Snuggery."

I started the next day for Reedbourne. It was a perfect day—not too warm, not too cold—a day when white fleecy clouds flecked the blue sky, when the trees looked green and bright, and the country put on its sweetest looks to greet my coming.

The station of Reedbourne, far away from the village of that name—the South Western Railway—as, perhaps, the reader knows, eschews towns and other places where passengers might be supposed likely to get in, and stops at long distances off, and even then under protest—is a pretty little roadside halting spot, set round and about with rhododendrons and great laurel trees, flanked by a fir plantation, in and out of which rabbits peep and scurry as if they were playing with each other at hide-and-seek.

Of course no one could tell me where The Snuggery was (the utter want of knowledge evinced by the inhabitants of a neighbourhood when a stranger arrives amongst them is only to be equalled by the amount of their information when he comes to be regarded as the captive of their bow and spear), so I walked on to the village; now across a bit of common land; anon through a piece of stretching heath, yellow with gorse, and purple with heather; again along roads bordered by holly hedges, shaded by Spanish chestnuts, till I came to the church with its square gray tower, and squat body, and graveyard filled full, quite full. Ay, there were the billows of green that repeated the universal story; there lay the infant, and there the man or woman who had grown up and then been carried thither. "Storied urns and animated busts" met the eye in plenty, as well as those rude wooden monuments which mark where the body lies mouldering, well enough and long enough, considering the brief mortality of our memories.

Over the low gate I leaned and looked. Across the green sward the sunbeams fell as warm and as bright as they did on the common and the heath, where the bees hummed and the grasshoppers sang, and where there was nothing to speak of death—sad, pathetic, blessed ending of all our struggles, hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows.

Close by where I stood there was an old tomb, black with age, grey and green with lichen, on which the date MDCXXIII. had grown almost illegible; while hard by was a little mound so recently raised that the turfs had not yet knitted closely over it—a mound so small that possibly no one save the mother who bore it mourned for the tiny creature lying beneath. Over two hundred years, and perhaps not more than two weeks, set sail on the great ocean which laps on the shore of time; for ever ebbing, never flowing.

Of necessity a man who lives alone, whose thoughts, as a rule, are confided only to himself, has some odd ideas; and just then I had a strange vision of the stately man-of-war, represented by the old tomb-stone, beating about the ocean of eternity, being hailed by the queer little cock-boat manned by an infant.

Into that sunny churchyard a full, full harvest had been *garnered by the reaper Death*. To how many a story

was there written *Finis* ! Heartburnings, jealousies, cares, sorrows, were all past at last. Dives and Lazarus, the man full of honours, his fellow perplexed with cares. Under tons of granite, reared apparently lest he should get up out of his grave again, lay Cræsus, whose will had been duly proved in the Probate Court, and received honourable notice in the columns of the *Illustrated London News* ; and a little way off Tom Styles, who slept as sweet a sleep under the Daisy quilt, with a rough stone at his feet and another rough stone at his head, as though masons had laboured for weeks to hew his monument and engrave his epitaph.

What a peaceful scene it was, solemn, but not, to my thinking, sad ! Rest seemed to brood over the quiet graves. No noise, save the humming of the wandering bees and the twitter of a few birds, intruded on the silence of the hour. The church stood outside the village, quite away, in fact, by itself among some meadows. Anything more still—anything more utterly aloof from life—its cares, its passions, its pains, its toils, cannot be conceived than that God's acre lying around the old stone building, which already in fancy I called my own parish church, and surrounded by a lot of associations—children born of those curious parents, Memory and Imagination. I wondered whether Mr. Turtle was buried in the graveyard, and if so, where he lay ; and then it occurred to me I had stood idling long enough by that wicket-gate, and that the business which was the motive of my journey ought to be attended to.

After many inquiries, a butcher's lad at length directed me to The Snuggery.

I was to "bear across some fields till I came to a bridge, on the opposite side of which the path took me right along the river till I saw a weir ; when I got to the weir I would see a lane to the right, and if I followed that to the sign of The Oak and Thistle I should be within a stone's throw of the house."

"What is the name of the river ?" I asked, after obtaining all this amount of information.

"Why, the Reed to be sure, what other ?" What a walk that was—through the *freshly-mown* meadows, beside the *quiet rippling river all fringed with rushes*, its bank still

bright with flowers ! The orchids and the wild hyacinths, the hawthorn and violet, had faded away with the last breath of spring, but to them had succeeded a right royal show of scent and colour.

Meadowsweet—sweet, sweet meadowsweet—apple-pie, pennyroyal, all these things were either giving forth their perfumes, or exhibiting their gay colours to the summer's sun. How cool the water looked on the opposite bank, shaded and sheltered by alders ! How thick the willows grew beside the path along which I sauntered ! How far away seemed the great metropolis with its noisy streets, its dusty side-paths, its glare and heat and turmoil !

"Ah ! this is living, this is enjoying," I said, taking off my hat and letting the pure soft breeze fan my temples. "If one would recover the 'lost hours,' only in such a place as this can one hope ever again to meet them."

Very quietly I sauntered on, now pausing to look back at the church tower, now glancing at the shadows cast by the alder-trees ; now marking the circles caused by the rising of a fish, and again the diving of a water-rat who had not expected to see a stranger when swimming for his hole till, having passed all the landmarks I had been desired to notice, I found myself in front of a funny old cottage all stuck about with "To be sold."

How can ever I, who came to know that house so well, describe it ?

My first impression of the place is as my last ; it had always the sun upon it. In the bleakest day in winter there seemed a little bright gladness there. An old house too, evidently ; in fact it was the last original homestead left upon what had once been an extensive property, but now divided and subdivided till not even the owners of the old estate could have sworn to its identity.

This was the tiny scrap left of a park formerly owned by the noble family of Reedbourne. Here and there some traces of their former occupation may still be found in the neighbourhood. Pillars ornamented with their arms, gates eaten through with rust, which formerly swung open to greet their coming, or speed their going. A great family undoubtedly. Famous, not so long ago in the world's history, and now nor peerage nor descendant has aught to *tell of their former grandeur*. They are gone—they have

vanished as utterly as the last stones of their once splendid mansion, in which before it was finally pulled down, the birds built and the wild animals congregated.

Windowless, doorless, roofless, it stood open to all the four winds of heaven till the whole property was sold, when the new owner sent down a gang of workmen who levelled the great house with the earth. In course of years, the portion referred to in Messrs. Twiner's advertisement changed hands more than once. First, a gentleman had it as a shooting box (the shooting at Reedbourne was very good about the end of the last century); then a couple of maiden ladies resided in the house; after their decease, a farmer who rented some of the adjacent land lived in the cottage, and erected the barn referred to in the advertisements; after he beggared himself, the place lay vacant for a long time, or else was only inhabited by labourers, till, to cut the story short, Mr. Turtle bought the little property for "an old song;" and having some interest with the Railway Company, which enabled him to travel on better terms than most other passengers, he set up his household gods at Reedbourne.

Looking at the old church, I had pictured him going there to worship with his family, a clumsily-built man with a lumbering walk, slow, good-hearted, florid of face, dark of hair, his locks inclined and induced to fall a little over his low square forehead. How imagination may be out in the mental portraits it draws! The real Turtle never went to church at all, was not buried at Reedbourne, and had not a single trait in common with the Turtle of my fantasy.

His hair was light (as I saw when Mrs. T. subsequently showed me his photograph), he had a high arched forehead, a lean face, long nose, thin lips, which wore a smirk—Heavens such a smirk! As regards dress, affected a sort of clerical costume, and his white tie was a miracle of neatness. He belonged to some extremely small and obscure sect amongst the Dissenters, and "made a poor living," so his widow informed me, by preaching, lecturing, and rendering himself useful in a religious fashion. He looked years younger than his wife, who, if he were anything like his photograph, *must have proved a serious trial to so smug and conceited an individual as the dear lamented.* If ever

a man desired the good opinion of this world, and the advantages its good opinion can obtain, that man, I should say, was Samuel Turtle.

How often I have travelled with persons of his type ; heard his very double laying down the law in politics or religion to some weaker brother, or, oftener, sister ; seen his duplicate intent on winning souls by his own admirable moral deportment ; marked the gracious self-satisfied smile, the consciousness of heavenly gifts not vouchsafed to the multitude, and marvelled if the thorn in that fleshly frame were a wife like Mrs. Turtle—a home resembling The Snuggery.

"Poor dear, he were going to call it The Retreat!" explained Mrs. Turtle, "but he feared the name might be regarded as Papistical. He were always so careful not to give offence ; and though he had no ill-feeling to the priests and suchlike, remembering they could not help their ignorance, still he could not abear anything like following of the Pope."

Which, indeed, I could well believe. Any man who looked less like a follower of the Pope than Mr. Turtle never existed. But, then, anything less like Mr. Turtle than his house was never imagined either.

An old house built of warm red brick, plenty of plaster showing in the joints, lichens, gray and brown and yellow, wandering over and beautifying the wrinkles caused by time and wind and rain ; two projecting gables, with deep wide eaves, where many a family of young swallows and martens must have been reared ; three windows, small and old-fashioned, on each of the two stories, which formed the main part of the building ; a meagre lawn, a deep-sunk fence, a few melancholy pine-trees, marking what had once been the avenue ; some recently-planted laurels bordering a narrow walk leading up to the hall door. Externally this was The Snuggery, and I confess my heart warmed to it.

Any intending purchaser of a "Charming Villa" would have turned on his heel and walked back to the station incontinently ; but I went on, presented my credentials, and was ushered by a demure-looking little maid-of-all-work into the "parlour," where sat Mrs. Turtle, surrounded by her family.

It was she who had the dark hair, the florid face, the

clumsy figure, the uncouth gait of my imaginary Turtle ; but she possessed, in addition, a "go" and a "diplomacy" to which the ideal deceased could lay no claim.

"O, yes of course you can see the house," she said a little peevishly, "there have been scores about it already ! It's not often there's such a place in the market. Sorry enough shall I be to quit it, goodness knows—but there ! Now, where is that girl ? Jemima, Jemima !"

"I only want to look over the garden and take a turn round the land," I interposed ; the while a shrill treble from the kitchen intimated that Jemima was "Coming, mum."

"Your good lady, sir, I suppose, will like to see the house for herself," suggested Mrs. Turtle, with a certain aggressiveness of manner, not towards me, but the supposed wife in the background.

"Unfortunately, I am not married," I answered, adopting the formula approved of in such cases.

"Your sister, then," she amended, with, however, no accession of amiability.

"I have no sister," I explained.

Mrs. Turtle looked at me in black amazement. Then she said, quite unconscious, I am sure, of the dubious construction I might have put upon her words,

"Excuse me, sir, but is not there, then, no lady you would like to take a look over the house ?"

"I have, unhappily, no lady relatives, except a very young niece."

The change which came over Mrs. Turtle's round face on hearing this statement is simply indescribable.

Probably she had endured many things at the hands of men's wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers. Of one thing I am certain : never before had an "unencumbered" bachelor come to view the house and grounds.

"Make yourself quite at home, sir," she entreated, opening a glass door which opened on a small inner yard. "The gate yonder leads into the garden, and beyond there is a way to the fields ; but Tommy can go with you. Where's your cap, Tommy ? Show the gentleman round the place."

"The gentleman" was about to enter a protest against this arrangement, when happily it was discovered that

Tommy had not on his shoes, for which reason it was agreed that the meadows and garden should be inspected without the assistance of a guide, and that one of the children would act as cicerone when the turn of the out-buildings to be viewed arrived.

Thus quite alone I wandered out into one of those dear old gardens where fruit and flowers and vegetables grow together, where thyme strays all about the beds, and columbine blooms where it listeth, and high privet hedges fence the enclosure from the eyes of the curious and the steps of the profane ; where damson trees are to be seen laden with fruit ; where there are bowers cunningly devised to shelter from the heat of the mid-day sun ; where the damp piece of ground down by the pond under the hawthorn is kept for periwinkle and lilies of the valley ; where there is something of almost everything good of its kind ; which would cause the heart of a regular gardener to faint within him, but has charms unspeakable for little children, and is not destitute of attraction for children of a larger growth who love to pace the moss-grown paths in silence, and solitude impossible where the noise of rollers, the clatter of mowing machines, the snip of edging-tools, and the general stir and bustle inseparable from well-kept walks and trim borders prevails from dewy morn to pensive eve.

I was delighted. This was my ideal garden, presented to my sight in all its tangled reality. Here the birds built, here the birds sang ; here I should see the lilacs coming into flower, and behold the laburnum fling wild her golden curls ; here was a well, an actual old-fashioned well with chain and bucket all complete ; while elder-trees, laden with bloom and berry, met the sight, growing wild outside the hedges.

From the garden I passed into the fields, which were indeed in no higher state of cultivation than the rest of the little estate ; fences out of repair, gates broken and lying on the ground, or else tied to posts with bits of old rope. Evidently illness, or shortness of money, or that weariness which sooner or later attacks every one who tries to wage an unequal fight with Fortune, had proved too much for Mr. Turtle. The place might have been in Chancery for *fifty years*, so tangibly was the mark of ruin impressed on *everything*, from the children to the horse, who, with bent-

over knees and bowed head, looked humbly at me as I walked close beside where he grazed.

Finding nothing exhilarating in the aspect of the meadows, I returned to the garden, where one of the little female Turtles, in a very scant and very dirty print dress, with sun-bonnet to match, was amusing herself by jumping backwards and forwards over the moss-covered stone roller. The only atom of mourning this child wore for her dead father was to be seen on her legs, which were covered with stockings once black, but now mellowed to a dusty brown. She was an ugly ill-mannered little sinner, who, between each uncouth jump, made a snatch at some gooseberries growing close at hand, and ate them voraciously, skins and all, making a disgusting champing noise the while, as though she had been a pony discussing a feed of oats.

Not far from the well was an apple-tree covered with lovely rosy fruit—a very early apple, locally known as the Duchess's Favourite ; and at sight of the boughs laden and drooping with the weight of the rich burden they had to support, I felt myself longing like a boy to put forth my hand and gather.

"May I gather an apple?" I asked of Miss Turtle, who at this juncture took another awkward plunge over the roller.

"What d'ye say?"

"May I gather an apple?"

"S'pose so—we does;" and she leaped back again.

I gathered and sat down to eat. No fruit ever tasted more delicious. When I had finished I drew up a bucket of pure cold water, and, after rinsing out a little tin mug which stood beside the well, drank.

Yes, this was just what I wanted; the silence of the country, the clear blue sky overhead, the songs of the larks in the meadows beyond, water cold and fresh from its native spring; a little spot all of my own all to myself. Yes, I must have The Snuggery if it could be bought at a fair price; but I would not pay that asked by Mrs. Turtle's solicitors.

Just as I had reached this point in my soliloquy, Tommy appeared coming down one of the grass paths in the garden—Tommy *swept, garnished, and sheepish*; Tommy "*drest in all his best,*" with shoes well polished, with face rubbed

up into a painful brightness, holding his cap in his hand as if he were posing for his photograph.

"Marianne, ma says you are to go in," said he, addressing his sister.

"Sha'n't, then, there!" was the answer.

"Very well," sighed Tommy, as if there was no more to be said. "I'm to show you the stable and the rest of it," he went on, turning to me, who, taking the hint, requested him to lead.

In the coachhouse, so called by courtesy, we were joined by Mrs. Turtle, who had also renovated her own appearance, and now burst upon us in the glory of a fresh cap, with wide strings floating over her shoulders. Her dress was the same, but she had brushed and tidied it up a little, and fastening the crape collar was an enormous mourning brooch—large enough to have been in the memory of half the dead lying in Reedbourne churchyard.

From the outbuildings the lady conducted me into a spacious kitchen, with red-tiled floor, across which a matronly-looking hen, elderly, sedate, and long legged, was solemnly manœuvring her latest progeny.

"Drat those fowls!" exclaimed Mrs. Turtle. "One can't leave a door open a minute but they must be messing over everything."

"Last time aunty Sophy was here Speckles laid in her bonnet," volunteered the youngest of the Turtle brood who was clinging to his mother's skirts.

"You naughty child, be quiet! Aunt Sophy would be very angry indeed if she heard you. Little boys should never speak till they are spoken to."

"But Speckles did," repeated the irrepressible, "*and the egg got broked.*"

"Got broked, indeed! I wonder where you learnt to speak English, Master Alfie," said Mrs. Turtle, with elephantine playfulness. "Take your fingers from your nose, ducky," she went on, addressing a puny atom of a girl, evidently her especial pet. "I only hope Mr. Cheverley may not be set against the place by seeing such a tribe of little wild Indians running loose about it. Poor things, poor little darlings, I can't check them as I ought, Mr. Cheverley. I never look at them but I seem to—"

Here Mrs. Turtle's usual flow of language deserting her, she took refuge in her pocket-handkerchief.

Now was it right that I, a lonely man, meaning no harm to any one, should, when I went in a business-like way to look over a house, have my heart harrowed in this fashion? Was it fitting, I ask, that Mrs. Turtle should at this juncture find her feelings overcome her to such an extent that she was obliged to retire from the room, leaving me alone with four children—me, who had never known in all my life what to say to a child?

"Ma's always like that when she has visitors," observed Tommy, in a matter-of-fact way, intended to be reassuring, and which undoubtedly was so.

"This," said Ducky, touching a clean counterpane—we were in the best bedroom by this time, for Mrs. Turtle had insisted upon my seeing everything there was to see—"was put on for you, and will be taken off when you go."

"You're to stop for tea," further explained Speckles' friend. "Mimy has gone into the village for some buns."

"And I am to show you the back way to the station when you go," explained Tommy, still unconsciously posing for his photograph.

"And remember, ma said you were to be sure and not take a shilling if the gentleman offered it to you," supplemented Ducky.

Being furnished with which general *carte du pays*, all that remained was to get out of the house as speedily as might be. So, after having declined Mrs. Turtle's offer of wine, one glass of which she was good enough to say could not hurt me, and assured her it was out of my power to stop and partake of tea, and having got rid of Tommy at the Oak and Thistle, where he struck off to spend the shilling already burning his pocket, I walked slowly up the main road leading to the village speculating not unpleasantly as to all I should do when The Snuggery was indeed my very own.

Already I felt myself an inhabitant of Reedbourne—its people were to be my people, its doings my doings.

With what interest I regarded an ecclesiastic, who returned my scrutiny with a look of bland righteous curiosity!

If he had been a little less like a fox his appearance

might have pleased me better, but his face was one which would probably improve upon acquaintance ; and in fancy I could perceive those keen eyes glancing over my little library of good and rare books ; watch those thin lips uncloset to make some apt quotation, to utter some apposite remark. Nay, might it not even be that hereafter I should know him so well as to speak of those doubts which trouble faith, though they cannot destroy it ? That spare frame, that worn face, that ascetic expression, spoke of thought and learning, while at the same time something in his appearance gave me the impression that this person whom I set down as the rector, was a man of the world, using the phrase in its best and widest sense.

If such were the case, he would sympathise with the wrestlings I had held over vexed subjects, not merely in theology, but Nature—sympathise, even though he failed to solve them.

Yes, I thought everything in Reedbourne, from The Snuggery to the parson, promised well for comfort. My own poor father had been somewhat of a mere book-worm, yet how gladly strangers entering our parish welcomed his rare visits, or accepted his ever-ready hospitality ! On the same principle, I felt that I, who do not care for chance acquaintances, should nevertheless be more than pleased to clasp the hand of this new spiritual guide ; and though I rebuked myself for the bigoted idea, still it would recur to me that the rector could not fail to be delighted when he heard The Snuggery was not given over to another itinerant preacher, but to a stanch church-goer, who, in the course of a thirty-five years' experience, had heard almost every sermon delivered in London worth listening to.

"He is about my own age," I considered, "and probably is acquainted with many of the celebrities I have heard preach. That will be another topic of interesting conversation ;" and, so thinking, I went on my way with a light heart and an agreeable expression of countenance, pausing often to regard the exterior of some large house, and wonder who dwelt in it, feeling [even a sort of proprietorship in the butcher's shop, where hereafter I hoped to order my modest joint ; and resisting an impulse to make an errand *across the road* and enter into affable converse with the

grocer, who, in his shirt-sleeves and a snowy white apron, was standing at his door yawning undisguisedly.

Yes, the village of my dream at last : fairyland, with its green banks, where in spring-time the primroses put out their tender blossoms shyly ; sleepy hollow, where the rooks might caw all the day long an' it pleased them, without let or hindrance ; cosy nook, sheltered from the world's din and turmoil, the village I had been looking for, the ideal I had sought to realise, and hitherto in vain ! Peaceful and quiet, quiet as its own graveyard, and yet there was nothing desolate about its quietude !

After the first few minutes there is to a Londoner something terribly lonely in the utter stillness and deadness of most country places, but there really was nothing lonely about Reedbourne. According to its fashion it resembled some out-of-the-way nook in the City, or a quiet square in the West Central district. It was still, because just out of the roar and fret of the great hum of human life, but it was not inanimate. No sense of death, or of that repose which is almost akin to death, oppressed me then or after in that dreamy village. There was life, if not exuberant vitality. Plenty of blood was always coursing through its veins, placid and lethargic, as was the expression its fair face wore.

My impressions of Reedbourne, as I paced slowly through it on the occasion of my first visit, were pretty nearly those Mr. Smith had sneeringly put into words.

"Amongst these daisies and these buttercups," so I am quite certain ran my mental thoughts, "all the men must be honest and all the women virtuous. Here, no struggle for mere existence can be waged. In those humble but pretty cottages, the curse laid upon labour must seem shorn of half its terror. What would not a cockney, even in the position in life of a mere clerk—such as I was, a little time back—give for that thatched hut all covered with ivy and decked with roses, surrounded by its fair piece of garden-land, where the broad-beans are now in pod, and the set-runners fruiting and blooming at the same time, as in our lovely fashion ? Who could be bankrupt here ? A poor officer would feel lost if he were to wander into so quiet a neighbourhood. No usurer ever held a bill of sale on the furniture of any resident in Reedbourne, I feel

confident. Ay, let my friend of the long gaunt frame and the sad expression sneer as he likes, there is no place like the country, and Reedbourne is the best bit of country in England."

Very much cleverer people than myself have since come to precisely the same conclusion; which fact, while it cannot quite exonerate me from the charge of having been a simple fool, may at all events serve to extenuate my folly.

There is a nice innocent look about Reedbourne which might deceive even a Bow Street magistrate. He would let it out on bail, or dismiss any charge against it instantly, or pat it on the back and sympathise with it as a pretty guileless creature from the country, who got into questionable company, and must be taken care of and befriended; and then Reedbourne, with a smile on its lovely face, would "thank his worship, and withdraw," and nobody would ever see a look of satire or amusement ruffle its expression, since one of the things in which that favoured village is deficient is a sense of humour. No surgical operation could make it see the point of any joke which was not either coarse or foolish. Its apprehension, as I understand the position of affairs now, is that of the pothouse or the nursery.

But on that lovely afternoon there was for me "A Golden Time." Still, "The world (at Reedbourne) was in its prime," and I enchanted myself with regarding a village which, not content with one green, as is the custom of most villages—must be a spendthrift in that as in all other respects, and just have a green, scattered all about with some sort of houses—shops, mansions, cottages—wherever it pleased the foot of any chance wayfarer to pause.

Already I had passed three: one graced by a chestnut-tree and three poplars; one bare of anything save a pond; one quite bewooded by elms. Almost under the shadow cast by a line of these trees, two waggons filled with furniture had come to a stand immediately opposite a very large house of the Queen Anne period, set conveniently, but not too modestly, back from the road.

A warm comfortable-looking house, that spoke of money as plainly as house well could.

The men were busily engaged in putting nose-bags on *their horses*; and so I, who in my old age had grown idle and curious, stood looking through the open gate, and

speculating what the rooms in that house might be like, and who the people were that would be soon occupying them.

A dreamer all my life, I pictured the new tenants as middle-aged, solidly wealthy people, quiet in their habits, regular in their hours, punctual in their payments.

They had sons and daughters almost grown up, and younger children as well ; the family *must* be large, because, manifestly, the house had been built to meet the requirements of a man whose quiver was full to overflowing.

Unless they were Quakers—and about this I had my misgivings, as there was a grave, rich, substantial, solidly-sure look about the house and the appurtenances thereof, which might well have attracted and retained the notice of a member of the Society of Friends—the new tenants would give many a party, and add considerably to the liveliness of Reedbourne.

To myself I could picture little boys in knickerbockers, little girls with masses of fair hair flowing down their backs, coming and going, out and in the old-fashioned house. I fancied in the winter walking past that dwelling and seeing the gas-light gleam across the darkness, and carriages setting down guests ; while as for the summer, from open windows I felt satisfied music would float and laughter echo.

Ay, for long years I had been lonely—God alone knows how lonely—but humbly I thank Him my heart never grew chill, my temper grudging. The happy faces of the children, the beauty of lovely women, the luxury of refined homes ; these things though not mine, and not for me, had always seemed gracious and exquisite even in the darkest days of poverty ; and was it likely that now, when I had money to spare, leisure and health, eyes to behold the fairness of Nature, ears to hear the songs of the birds, the hum of the grasshopper, I should wish other than that the new owner of the Queen Anne house should be happy and prosperous—though he was nothing to me—and I likely to be for ever something less than nothing to him ?

Just then a gardener coming to the gate touched his hat to me.

"Beautiful day, sir," he remarked.

"Lovely," I answered. "The fresh tenants will take possession under every advantage."

"Bless you, sir, they won't be in for a fortnight yet, I daresay. Half the furniture isn't down, and the workmen can't be out of the new billiard-room this week. It will be a place, sure-ly. If the old Squire could see the house now he would go on. He was that mean within doors he did not even let the smell of paint nigh it for forty year; and now this gentleman he has pulled down and built up, and tore down partitions and thrown out rooms. Ah, we want more of his sort about Reedbourne, that we do!"

"What is the gentleman's name?" I asked.

"Mr. De Field, sir. Field, I am given to understand, they calls him for short up in London."

"Field!" I repeated. "Do you mean Frank Field?"

"Very like, sir; the things come down addressed with a Christian Hef, but I am no scholar."

"Frank Field taken this place?" I repeated to myself in amazement, not indeed that in these days of rapid fortune-making I ought to have felt surprised at anything; but then I had known Mr. Field when he could certainly not have taken even so good a little cottage as The Snuggery.

"I suppose the gardens are very large?" I remarked, while my eyes looked longingly inside the gate.

"Will you take a walk round, sir?" suggested the man, who, already full of beer, probably scented more in the direction of my waistcoat-pocket. "The men will attend to their vans; they are only gone round to the Reedbourne Arms for half a pint, and they won't need me yet awhile. Yes, sir, the gardens has always been very good, noted far and near. In the old Squire's time, though he could abear to spend no money indoors a'most at all, he still were liberal-handed about the houses and suchlike. 'Don't spare the muck, Harner,' he used to say. Harner was head and I was one of the under ones; and, by Jingo, he didn't spare it! There is not such a bit of ground in all the parish, though I say it; and you might search England through and not find such camellias as I could have shown you three months ago."

But what I wanted more especially to see was the inside of the dwelling-house; and as we passed from room to room my old-fashioned ideas were fairly put to the rout. *Such painting—such moulding—such gilding! And then the paperhangings and the furniture!*

Almost overwhelmed, I stood and looked about me.

Home! Could anybody feel at home in such a blaze of colour? But then my ignorance, my utter ignorance of high life, of wealthy life—of any life, in fact, save that led by a poor clerk in an insurance office! Pity me, reader, when I tell you I could see no more children leaving and entering that abode. Little gentlemen and little ladies, it might be, would cross its threshold in the days to come, but girls and boys never; no clay marbles, no wooden hoops, nothing common or unclean, could possibly gain access to those begilt, besatined, bemirrored rooms.

Even The Snuggery, with its hateful children, its snarling dog, its moulting parrot, its worn carpets and piano, supported on one side by a music-stool screwed up to its fullest height, seemed more to merit the sacred epithet of Home than this spick and span old house, rouged and powdered like some ancient beauty, renovated, restored, and spoiled.

Well, well, and so De Field had prospered, and was going in for a Queen Anne house at Reedbourne, respectability and ostentation. What on earth did it all matter to me? And yet it did matter, for I felt angry.

Why? Ah, for that sensation I can give you nor verse nor chapter.

He had a house which pleased him; soon I hoped to have a house which pleased me. I did not envy him all his brass and glass. I would not have taken the residence so decked out, as a gift; and yet the sight of Mr. De Field's new home, white, glittering, filled with easy-chairs and easier couches, surrounded by flowers, got up in every respect regardless of expense, filled me with a curious discontent, a vague dissatisfaction.

Perhaps because I knew the man, not personally indeed, save in the vaguest and most distant fashion, as an omnibus cad may know the fare who has once travelled with him from Paddington to the Bank; perhaps because I was an old-fashioned simpleton, and deemed the house of a business man should look like business until the hour when he and commerce shook hands and separated on the very best of terms—those, namely, of mutual respect.

Anyhow, Mr. De Field's "little box" at Reedbourne failed to recommend itself to my primitive tastes, the while

its magnificence aroused those feelings—of shall we say envy, jealousy, and all uncharitableness?—to which expression has already been given.

Somehow gilding and buhl cabinets, inlaid tables, and carpets, and hangings, which dazzle with their brightness, seem to me out of place in Arcadia.

Among the daisies and the buttercups, should we not rather consider Nature's arrangement of colours, than revel in the Tyrian hues of Art?

But there, I am an old fogey! "A poor, dear, stupid, silly old man!" as I have been given to understand Mrs. Turtle styled me, though, indeed, if you come to that, there cannot be such a disparity of years between myself and the buxom T. as could justify her standing on the vantage ground of youth in order to contemplate the waste of years across which I have travelled since I left my cradle.

As for the grounds belonging to Mr. De Field's house, Squire Blunt, the old proprietor, who dearly loved shrubs, flowers, trees, a thick sward, and conservatories full of all rare exotics, had made them as beautiful as he could, and the new owner was spoiling them as fast as possible.

Yes, it was all of a piece. The cold papers, the bright mouldings, the chilly glass screens, the hard pictures, the sculpture placed where, if marble could shiver, those scantily-dressed figures must have perished from cold—these things, I say, were but complementary to the starveling standard roses, the lawns shaved to baldness, the hideous ornamental gravel, the still more hideous floral arrangement out of doors.

"Money has been no object," remarked my cicerone, as I stood looking at some bedding-out designs, some of which resembled very ill-made jam tarts, and others an elaborate trifle. "What Mr. De Field always says is, 'Spare no expense.' So as the things is done properly, money is no object."

"So I should say," I answered; and having produced from my waistcoat-pocket the coin for which the man's fingers were itching, I left Reed House, and walked up towards the station with a little—just a little—of the enchantment which had hung about my visions for an hour *previously, dispelled.*

As I wended my way through the straggling village, I saw another arrival of furniture, portending a fresh inhabitant in Reedbourne.

This time, however, there was no flourish of trumpets about the business. The removal had evidently been effected as cheaply as possible, and the goods which "Nelson, Carrier," brought down in two carts from the station, were as different from those still waiting delivery at Reed House as "Skim Dick" is from Stilton.

Old chairs, old carpets, old tables, bedding sewed up in bundles, boxes of queer shapes and sizes, all these goods and chattels were solemnly deposited round and about the side path in front of a very small cottage, and from thence conveyed by the carrier, his son, and a diminutive maid-servant into the interior.

As I paused for a moment, contrasting, not uncharitably, I hope, the furniture of the two houses, a couple of women passed by.

"Lor," said one, in that tone of voice which so enormously reminds one of very sharp vinegar, "what a mangey lot of sticks! If they had been mine, I should have felt ashamed to move them."

"Perhaps he hadn't no money to buy no more," hazarded the other. "Some of them curates is as poor as church mice."

"Calls theirselves gentlemen, too," said No. 1. "For my part, I have no patience with such airs and graces. What I says, when I hears about gentlefolk, is, 'Have they a carriage, and do they keep a suit of servants?' If not, they may be very good sort of people, but they ain't my sort, that's all."

If we think of it, fools are oftentimes the best exponents of this world's wisdom; and not so confident as I had once felt that London notions and modern ideas were unknown in the rural districts, I bent my steps to the little station, where, having half an hour to wait, I sat inhaling the odour of the pine woods, and watching the "gallopers" as they raced through without stopping to London, or sped like the wind to the towns lying in the placid country far and far away.

CHAPTER V.

ADELAIDE LEMBERG.

IN due time I became the owner of that eligible freehold property set forth in Messrs. Twiner's advertisement ; but it was far on in the autumn before I actually entered into possession of my new estate. Words cannot tell what I endured at the hands of Mrs. Turtle ere doing so. For good steady persistency, for determined resolution to strive and obtain her own way, for utter want of delicate sentiment and lack of consideration towards the feelings of other people, commend me to the widowed mother of a large family. Truly her weakness is her strength ; her forlorn position is a very tower of strength.

When a woman confronts a man, arrayed in crape and surrounded by pledges of affection in all states and stages of growth ; when she says she is poor, alone in the world, making a struggle to bring up her "dear children," respectably, what can one do but submit ? What could I do but submit ? Nothing ; and so I submitted, until life became a burden, and the postman's knock grievous as a running sore ; till, in fact, if she would have only returned the purchase-money, The Snuggery had been hers and a handsome cheque as well. Fortunately, however, Mrs. Turtle did not desire to repossess the eligible freehold. She only wanted to rent it, and proposed that I should board and lodge with her.

"She knew she could make me comfortable," she wrote. "At any rate, I might try the experiment for three months," which, she went on to say, would not "bind either of us"—the meaning of such utterance being to my apprehension still enveloped in mystery. Her first request was that she might remain for a little while after the sale of the cottage. This, in a moment of weakness, being conceded, the little while lengthened itself out over the fruit season, during which Mrs. Turtle so bestirred herself that not an apple or pear was left on the branches, while the filbert and walnut trees were stripped with masterly comprehensiveness. Of course *I did not want* the fruit ; but still as I had paid her *individually and collectively*, for every cabbage on the ground,

every pippin on the boughs, she need not have left the place bare as though locusts had passed over it.

When I refused her proposal of "sharing expenses," and negatived a suggestion that she should remain at The Snuggery as managing housekeeper, she attacked me about the furniture, under pretence that I had got her poor husband's property "dirt cheap," since "everybody said" if the auction had not taken place on a wet day, such a freehold would have fetched double. She insisted that I, and I only, ought to purchase her furniture. All in vain I represented that I did not require her chairs and tables, and that when she removed to the lodging-house she spoke of purchasing, all the odds and ends The Snuggery contained would come in useful. She turned my arguments against myself. Where could such odds and ends prove so useful as just where they were? As for the lodging-house, everything in it would be complete and "ready to her hand."

After this purchase was completed Mrs. Turtle discovered there were some articles included in the sale "she would not have parted with, if it were ever so," and entreated me to allow her to buy them back.

Having no passionate attachment for anything in the house, I asked her to make out a list of the goods she wished to retain, and, under the delusion that she meant to move at once, gave them to her. But Mrs. Turtle had not the slightest intention of moving. She now reverted to her original proposition of renting the house; this time, however, without any suggestion added, of "receiving me" as a lodger.

Politely enough, as I fancied, considering what had gone before, I wrote stating I had bought the place for occupation rather than investment, and that though I felt grieved at seeming to hurry her movements, I should be glad to know on what date it would suit her convenience to leave The Snuggery. In reply Mrs. Turtle inquired "if I wanted to turn her and her fatherless children out on the world without a roof to shelter them?"

At that point I lost patience. It was then I went to my solicitors, The Three Children, and instructed them to say I was willing to give up my purchase if Mrs. Turtle wished the affair cancelled. Mrs. Turtle thereupon came to my

lodgings, and wept and scolded to such an extent that in my despair I caught up my hat and fled, leaving the elderly spinster, who owned the house, to get rid of her as best she could. From my lodgings she went to my solicitors, who, having been forewarned by me, politely but firmly declined to see her on any pretext whatever. It is related that Mrs. Turtle sat in the clerks' office for three mortal hours, and asked each person who went in or came out if he was Mr. Greatchild, or Mr. Fairboy, or Mr. Goodlad, and that during that period not a man could be found who would confess to being a principal in the firm.

Meanwhile Mr. Fairboy had driven over to Mr. Turtle's office in Lincoln's Inn, and put him in possession of the state of affairs.

"I'll soon settle that," remarked Mrs. Turtle's relative, and he proved as good as his word. Within a week Mrs. Turtle had left The Snuggery, and I was installed as owner.

The first thing I did was to advertise an auction of the furniture, which Mrs. Turtle, I am given to understand, duly attended, in company with two of her children. She cried a good deal, it is stated, and confided to a friend, in a stage "aside," that she had been "robbed and cheated, completely taken in." Likewise she pointed to several of the lots, and said they were really hers, but that she had been "dared to remove them;" and that when she went to bid a tearful farewell to the cow, the poultry, and the horse, which were not included in the sale, she observed, "she trusted they would be treated better than she had been, but that it always fared ill with poor dumb beasts when they passed into the hands of strangers, who would most likely starve them—if they did not do worse."

It is a curious thing that no matter how limited one's acquaintance may be, some good-natured soul always turns up ready to repeat tidbits of conversation, in which no single compliment to one's good qualities finds a place!

Once rid of the furniture, I invoked the aid of painters, and paperers; the smoke of years was cleared off the ceilings, the dirt of years painted out, the walls were covered with pretty chintz-like hangings; not an inch of the house but was swept and garnished; and then I sent down new, *but not expensive*, furniture, and took possession.

"*Lor', sir, it do look gay,*" remarked the woman I had

engaged to look after my domestic concerns, as she gave a little final dust to an easy-chair in the drawing-room, and cast a not quite approving glance around, the while she added,

"The old place is as smart now as if it was expecting a young wife."

"There is no young wife for me, if that is what you mean, Mrs. Brooker," I answered.

"Well, well, sir, it is perhaps best as it is," said Mrs. Brooker, manifestly relieved.

"There can be no doubt about that," I replied, catching sight as I spoke of my own worn face and old-fashioned figure and elderly movements in a mirror opposite; and I meant what I said, though never for a moment did I conceal from myself the fact that in every paper I had chosen, every article of furniture I had selected, the hope of a woman's approval, the desire of a woman's smile, influenced my purchase.

"Some day," I thought, "some day she may come here—one never can tell when, or how soon—and I should like her to find everything bright and pretty and gay, to do her honour."

Ah, Mrs. Turtle, with a little underlying venom, you styled me "A poor dear, stupid, silly old man!" but you never understood how much truth there was in the statement.

Stupid and silly enough Heaven knows, though not, perhaps, utterly foolish, seeing that through all I never dreamt of such a madness as marriage! In the little episode which lay next my heart, of which no one knew anything save myself, there was nothing to be ashamed of, though, indeed, I should have writhed, had a woman like Mrs. Turtle imagined my memory held so fair an image.

As it fell about, I will tell it to you, reader, only to account, recollect, for the dainty deckings of my new house so utterly at variance with all the instincts of my life.

I must go back a little in my tale, nearly six years, in fact, in order to begin at the beginning of the story which gave to my existence the only gleam of romance that ever tinged with colour the *monotonous* gray of an experience made up of *commonplace events* and routine duties. It

was raining. Looking back, it seems to me that it rained on very many days as I paced to and from the office. At all events, on that particular winter's night I remembered it rained sharply, and when I turned from the City Road into a side street, on my way westerly towards Pentonville, the wind caught my umbrella and almost blew it inside out. Altogether I was not in an amiable mood when I reached my lodgings. I had been detained at the office. I was cold and wet and hungry. My tea was not ready, the "kettle did not boil;" the servant said a "new lodger for the first floor had put them out." Whereupon I made some remark to the effect that probably ere long they would require a new lodger for the ground-floor.

It was not often I spoke hastily either to landladies or their servants, but on this especial evening I felt so thoroughly out of tune I could not wonder at the maid telling her mistress "the parlours" had come home as "cross as two sticks." I heard her make this statement with my own ears, and decided that general amiability of manner towards lodging-house keepers was a mistake. After a time she brought up the kettle half full of lukewarm water, supplemented the kettle with the tea-tray, tried to poke up a recently-lit fire into a blaze, and then asked if I was pleased to want anything more.

The "no" she received in answer certainly did not err on the side of geniality.

Drawing up a chair to the fire and pulling a book out of my pocket, I beguiled, with reading, the time till flame should so far conquer smoke as to enable the kettle to boil. As I read my ill humour vanished. Always to me the words of a wise calm writer have proved as soothing as the tones of a congenial friend. This was what I opened on—a grave truth spoken across the centuries by a man whose weakness can never neutralise his greatness, whose grasp of intellect was, nevertheless, powerless to protect him from venality :

"Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other" and in like stately measure to the end of that short poignant essay, which would make even one who *never before thought reflect*. Ah, well indeed might Ben Jonson say of the man who penned it, "In his adversity I

ever prayed that Heaven would give him strength, for greatness he could not want!"

I had just not closed, but laid down my book for a moment, with one finger keeping the page open, and was considering, when suddenly there floated on my ear what I had never before heard of in that or any other lodging-house—the tones of music.

So-called music it had been my doom to listen to far and far too often—so often, indeed, that of late years, before taking apartments, I always inquired into the domestic arrangements of the dwelling where I t'ought of pitching my tent, and of the other dwellings to right and left. Whether, for example, the hall of No. 3 intervened between the parlour of No. 2 and its own ground-floor apartments; and if the young gentleman at No. 1 performed in the summer evenings on any sort of instrument, either in the garden at the rear or beside the open window in front. Further, I instituted strict cross-examination as to the presence in No. 2 of any piano, accordion, flute, violin, or penny-whistle, and satisfied myself, as far as any human being could, that no means of oral torture, beyond the vocal organs of the inevitable drab, and the shrill nagging voice of her mistress, existed on the premises.

On entering into negotiations with my present landlady, none of these precautions had been neglected, and for twelve months not a sound of attempted melody, save an occasional psalm-tune or sentimental ditty, sung through the nose and ascending from the basement, had harassed my ear.

Judge, then, of my astonishment when, under the very roof which sheltered me, I heard for the first time the notes of a piano, touched by no uncertain hand, and a voice, such as we might fancy the angels to possess, break the silence.

Ay, that was music, and under its spell my heart began to beat painfully!

As the feet of the little children dance when the organ-grinder wakens with a lively measure the echoes of some grimy court, so my soul, long a stranger to any sound which could remind it of a brighter gayer world outside the daily round of duties, which had become so accustomed that they ceased to be *even weary*, started with a throb, to find its *pulses were only numb, not dead*.

Softly I crept to the door, and, leaving it ajar, returned to my chair and listened—O, *how* I listened !

With what bated breath, what amazed surprise, what ashamed emotion, I drank in the sweetness of that wonderful voice ! In my night of middle age, which had never known moon nor star, it came as the song of the nightingale comes to the weary watcher beside the bed of pain. My eyes grew dim. I could not see the lamp or the fire-light clearly ; unheeded, the unwatched kettle boiled willingly, and spluttered over the hearth. I dared not stretch forth my hand. I almost feared to draw my breath, lest the spell should be broken.

In a moment, silence. The wild bird-notes ceased suddenly ; all at once the song died—not gradually or naturally, but in its very midst ; the bubbling of the kettle, the spluttering of the water over the hot bars, became painfully audible ; then the swish-swish of my landlady's silk dress, brushing the stairs as she majestically descended from the regions where she robed herself, met my ear ; then there came a clatter of plates, which announced that the family supper was in course of preparation ; then a smell of fried steak and onions ; the banging of the front gate as Mary Jane went out for the evening beer—these things which were usual occurred, and the voice which was unusual remained silent.

But all in a moment I could not return to the making of tea and the poking of fires—to the solitary chair, and the wisdom of the Lord of Verulam. Out of gear with myself, I was standing moodily looking with my bodily eyes at the flaming coals, and with my mental vision at the hopes and the enjoyments, and the pleasures, and the pains of youth, which my youth had never known, when something caused me to look round, and there, standing in the doorway, I beheld an apparition I shall never forget so long as I remember anything.

It was that of a young girl, who looked younger than her actual age, clothed in some soft black material, which fell in artistic folds about her slight lithe figure. She was fair ; she was beautiful. Not even now could I tell you *the exact* colour of her eyes, but they were large and *expressive* ; nor the shade of her brown hair, though the *fashion in which* it was dressed at once arrested my atten-

tion. It looked like the nest of some pretty bird; and lying amongst the tangled locks, as if merely resting there and not fastened in any way, was a little bow of black ribbon. Ah, Heaven, how often my heart has ached in the weary, lonely years, when memory has given me back that night, that room, that girl, that mass of fair, soft, curly, clustering hair, decked simply with its own bright beauty and a knot of ribbon!

"I did knock, sir," she said; "but I could not make you to hear."

Even without the last expression I should have known she was not English. Her accent was unmistakably foreign—as foreign as the little apologetic gesture with which she deprecated any possible anger at her intrusion.

"I could not rest," she went on, advancing at my entreaty towards the fire, "I could not be happy till I came myself and told you the fault was indeed with me, and not with the good madame. When she did let me come here she knew not of the piano that it was to me needful, as your book, your pen to you. Please not, therefore, to make madame suffer for me. Never, never again, while you are at your home, I will touch of a note. If you fear, I will go so soon as I can get another lodgment; but leave not madame on account of my forget. I assure you sacredly it was but that it went away from my mind that you had hatred of the music, or I should have kept quiet—still as a very mouse."

"I hate music!" I said in astonishment. "I wish you to remain mute! I never heard anything so exquisite as your singing in all my life. My only feeling, while listening, was a desire it might go on for ever."

"Ah, you make flattery!" she exclaimed.

"Flattery! No, indeed," I answered. "I came home in a bad humour with myself, the world, and the weather; and now I feel as if there was enchantment in mere existence."

"But will you not speak a different story to the madame to-morrow?"

"I shall tell her I should like to hear such singing as yours from morning till night."

She looked straight in my face, as if to read my very thoughts; *then her eyes filled with tears*, and she said, with *pitiful earnestness*,

"I only hope the other people in this great rich country may be of the same mind with you."

To this hour I do not know how it all came about ; but ten minutes later she was sitting opposite to me pouring out tea for both of us.

In person, Mrs. Haymes, Mary Jane being still absent, answered the bell, and audibly ejaculated, as she left the room, "Well, I'm sure !" in comment upon my request for a second cup and saucer.

No shyer man than myself probably ever existed, and of myself I certainly never should have made friends with Adelaide Lemberg. But she made friends with me. She was so solitary, and I—to her eyes—so old, that at once she gave me her liking and her confidence. Her grandmother had been English, which explained, she said, the fact that our language was "to her the same, only more better as the German." Her father was dead ; ach ! yes, I beheld ; and the white delicate hand smoothed down the folds of her black dress. And there were the little brothers and the little sisters, and the mother so beloved and so grief-stricken, and with scanty store of money. And she had one gift, her dower from God, and she was come to England, where there was so much gold, to strive and gain some of it. She had arrived but three days. She had friends, yes, indeed ; one of them had sent her to madame's, another was out in the country, and a third ill, but she had no need of money ; she must wait, and it would be well for her and the loved ones, all in the good time.

"And as I had been so kind, so—so kind (ah, how pleased the mother and the brothers and the sisters would be when they did read of my having permitted her for to pour the tea !) ; if I truly did love the music when it was not that of the learners or the streets, how she would feel at singing for me at such times as I had the inclination to listen !"

That was the beginning. When the end came I knew I loved her, but I did not tell her so. Foolish though I might be, my folly never urged me to reveal that secret.

Nay, I strove with all my strength to hide it, and so *successfully that*, quick and clever as she was, she failed to *guess the secret pain* she made me suffer, the constraint I

had to put on myself, when, with her red lips, she innocently kissed her "dear, dear friend," and bade him good-bye, the while tears filled her lovely eyes. She did not succeed all at once. She had sharp and weary work to make her genius recognised. She laboured incessantly, with a steady persistency, an untiring energy which only the young ever display. She lived hard, how hard I know now; for in those days I fared so meagrely myself that I could scarcely realise the deprivation of proper food as a serious calamity. It is after people have once been among the flesh-pots that they hanker for them; after they have revelled amongst leeks and cucumbers that they loathe the monotony of the wholesome manna.

But working or fasting or buffeted by Dame Fortune, she had ever a smile for me. Never, even when it was quivering with disappointment, did her face fail to light up in welcome when I entered. Almost every evening either she partook of tea with me or I of supper with her, while on Sundays we invariably dined together.

Mrs. Haymes did not quite like the arrangement, for reasons which must be obvious to those who have ever resided in lodgings; but Adelaide had a fine disregard, or rather want of perception, of the opinions of that portion of the world which could influence neither her pleasure nor her profit (this, I fancy, is an idiosyncrasy of foreigners that probably accounts for their greater lightness of heart), and made our mutual purchases, and superintended the preparation of our mutual repasts with a calm indifference to the opinion of Pentonville in general and our Row in particular, which engendered a fine feeling of Christian and suburban hatred in the bosom of Mrs. Haymes.

CHAPTER VI.

"SAD MEMORY."

ONE afternoon, 'twas in April, I remember, having come over a little faint and dizzy while in our secretary's office, he told me to leave off work for that day, and went so far—which, indeed, for the "*Home and Foreign*" was very far

indeed—as to send a messenger to the nearest cabstand for a vehicle to take me home, the fare of which was charged to the company. There could not have been much the matter with me, for as we drove northward I felt—save for a certain not unpleasant langour—as well as I had ever done in my life.

“I wonder,” I considered, “whether Adelaide is at home? If so we will go down the river together. A little change is all I require.”

For I had been working hard and late at the office. Just then we were short of clerks, and business was brisk, and the directors trusted to me, and—but all this has little to do with my story.

Arrived at Mrs. Haymes’ residence I dismissed the cabman, walked up the garden, ascended the two steps, opened the door with my latch-key, and beheld in the hall a trunk I recognised, a familiar portmanteau, a little bonnet-box I had seen before. All were labelled “Miss Lemberg.” Good Heavens! what did it mean?

Without the smallest ceremony I rushed upstairs and entered her room. She was standing by the centre table with one hand resting upon it, doing nothing; for the first time, in all my knowledge of her, absolutely idle.

“Ah, dear Mr. Cheverley, this is the one good—the one bright spot to be marked with a white stone in all this weary day, Of course I should have written to you; but to speak! ah, that is far, far the best!”

“What has happened? Where are you going?” I asked, breathlessly.

“What has happened is that I have no money. Where I go is back to the inn I came, whence to hither.”

“But—but I do not understand,” I gasped; “tell me all—tell me everything.”

“Yes—friend loved—yes—I tell you all. To the madame here I owe four weeks’ rent. Each day I look for a letter with order from mine own home. Each day it comes not. I fear the dear mother must be ill,” here she paused, and the sensitive lip twitched. “So madame wants her money. She is poor, she says, like me, wishes that I should be no longer in the place of a better tenant. Therefore, dear Mr. Cheverley, I go.”

I had been pulling myself together as she spoke.

All at once I seemed to become aware of my own physical feebleness, and of the necessity for mental strength. Yes, I was ill, and I must be well. I grasped these facts by some intuition.

"Please to sit down," I entreated, "and take off your hat. Do you know how much rent is owing to this harri-dan?"

"None, now, I am thankful to tell," said Adelaide, "as I meant to speak at first, only my poor foolishness came in between; the madame, she not so unkind as I thought, says, 'you have a watch, you have a chain, you give me them, and I return receipt for your lodgment, and you can take away your baggage. But you must be out of this before three o'clock.' Ah, I laboured to do it! Yet as you see so happily, because thus I behold you once more, I did fail of perfecting mine intentions."

I did not answer her words. I could not. It was at that moment I understood I loved her, that the sweet, foolish, fatal passion had left me untouched in early life, only to strike me a more deadly blow in my unlovely middle age. Without noticing that I failed to reply, she went on with the low tender voice in which it was natural for her to babble out her pretty graceful utterances.

"How happened it you came home?" she asked. "Another ten minutes and I should have been here no more. Ah, I see now how it is! How selfish it is in me to hitherto remain blind! You are pale—you look tired; you have returned in a cab; you are ill; dear, dear friend, sit down, and I will—no, I cannot—yes, I shall go to madame, and ask her permit that I may make you one more cup of tea before I leave."

"I am going to see Mrs. Haymes myself," I answered. "Remain here, will you please, till I come back?"

"It is so happy that you are back," she murmured, and sat wearily down in a chair to await my return.

In the hall stood Mrs. Haymes, black, bony, defiant.

"I want to speak to you for a moment," I said, holding open my parlour door for her to enter first, but she declined this politeness.

"After you, sir, *if you please*. I hope I knows my place, and *has tried to keep it*."

"*Just as you like, Mrs. Haymes,*" I replied. "Will you

kindly let me know how much Miss Lemberg owes you?"

"Marmselle owes me nothing, sir. She has got her bill receipted, as she will tell you if you ask her and she speaks the truth."

"Mrs. Haymes," I said, "I want Miss Lemberg's bill and her watch and chain."

"Then, sir, I am afraid you'll have to want them," answered Mrs. Haymes, smoothing out the folds of her black silk dress.

She was standing upon one side of the table and I on the other. I was looking straight at her, while she tried to avoid meeting my eye. Ordinarily one of the most timid of men—nervously averse to quarrelling—given to condone small acts of larceny and overlook petty theft—I felt myself on this occasion a very lion in defence of that poor girl upstairs. Hitherto I had regarded my landlady with a kind of awe, but now I knew I must subdue her.

"Mrs. Haymes," I said, "I want Miss Lemberg's watch and chain."

She began to waver—I could see it. Had I descended to argument she might have won; but, as matters stood, I was making an impression.

"Dear, dear," she began, pulling out her handkerchief and whimpering a little; "all the time you have been with me I am sure we never had a word before. A kinder, quieter, nicer gentleman could not have occupied apartments, till that first floor—serpent as she is—came and began making mischief. Them foreigners is all alike. The minute one of them, man or woman, crosses your threshold—"

"Mrs. Haymes, will you fetch Miss Lemberg's watch and chain?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I'm not going to see your good heart imposed upon; I have your interest too much on my mind. Let marmselle's watch and chain be, Mr. Cheverley. Who is she, I should like to know, as can't pay her way honest, that she should be let loose on the world, with a gold watch and chain deceiving them as works their fingers to the bone so that they may owe nobody nothing?"

"Mrs. Haymes, *will* you fetch that watch and chain?"

And as I spoke I laid my hand on the table with a

certain decision which startled the lady who objected to foreigners.

"To tell you truth, sir, the things ain't in the house to fetch. My Rosa Blanche chanced to be in here when I took them downstairs; and as her good gentleman happens to be in that line, working and suchlike for the jewellers round about Clerkenwell, I just lent the watch and chain to her so as to make sure I had not been cheated altogether out of my lawful debt."

Long experience of Mrs. Haymes convinced me there was not a word of truth in this statement; and therefore, producing my own watch, an old silver warming-pan of a timekeeper, which had belonged to my grandfather, I said:

"Mrs. Haymes, I will just give you five minutes to produce that watch and chain. If they are not in my hands by the time I have mentioned, I shall reluctantly be obliged to go for a policeman."

To this hour I have not the faintest idea what I should have done with the policeman if I had fetched him; but the shot told. Possibly Mrs. Haymes' knowledge of the powers of the law was as vague as my own; at any rate, with many tears and reproaches, she left the room, and shortly reappeared, stating, "it was a providence Rosa Blanche had turned into the draper's at the corner to buy a hood for her youngest child; so there," finished Mrs. Haymes, "is the gold watch and the gold chain, if either of them is gold—a thing, if I was you, sir, I'd have tested—and there's marmsele's bill, and glad indeed I shall be to see good money for it in place of trumpery jewelry."

I was looking over the bill as she spoke, and at this juncture remarked,

"I see you have charged one week's rent in lieu of notice."

"Yes, sir, quite regular, as you must be well aware."

"But *you* gave Miss Lemberg notice."

"As for that, if the rent is paid up now, marmsele is welcome to stay out her week here for me."

I opened my purse and counted the exact amount owing, then I drew my pen through the disputed item, and correcting the addition, *pushed the bill* across to Mrs. Haymes.

"*Miss Lemberg will not remain here,*" I remarked. "Be

so good as to receipt that account, and do not let us argue about the matter."

With lips very tightly pinched together, Mrs. Haymes did as she was desired; then she said with a sneering drawl,

"And your rooms, sir, are they to be empty too as well?"

"So far as I am concerned," I answered, "they need not be at present; it rests entirely with you."

Half an hour later, Adelaide was snugly ensconced in good lodgings in Claremont Square. Her piano was to follow immediately, so soon indeed, as I could have it removed. I had promised to forward her letters, and I forced the four pounds still left in my purse upon her as a loan. Tears came into her eyes as we parted for the time.

"It was the good God directed me to find you," she said. "What should have happened in this great city to me so lonely, without the fortune of meeting you?"

Next morning the expected letter arrived, and another also. The latter was from a person who offered Miss Lemberg a certain sum, on condition of her singing at half a dozen concerts he was about to give. The girl seemed wild with delight, but, I confess, I was unable to share her enthusiasm.

"It is so poor a thing," I ventured, and then she interrupted me.

"But much the better than none. It will be the commencement. Some one may hear me and say, 'She can sing, that girl,' and so give me a little more."

She accepted the offer, and all came about as she had prophesied. One evening she called at my lodgings (I was by that time in fresh quarters, the experiment of staying on at Mrs. Haymes' not having turned out satisfactorily), and, before I could place a chair for her, had poured out her budget of news. It was done, it was finished; her future was assured: she was to go to Italy, she was to be lodged, and to be boarded, to be clothed, and to receive a certain sum merely to put in her purse.

The friend, the kind friend—though not so kind as I—*who had sent her to the madame*, was he that arranged all *for her*. He blamed her for not having gone to him again,

he blamed her more for singing at the concerts, "but I think," she added, archly, "he had forgot me till then."

"No more anxiety for the dear mother; a little while, and she could give much help to all. There was but one thing for which she grieved: it was parting from me; I had been so good, so tender, but I would write. I must write, and could I promise not to forget her?"

Forget her!—well, well, but let that pass.

The next Sunday we spent together. After all, Bohemia is a happy land, where one can choose one's company, and keep it too without any thought or fear of Mrs. Grundy. The Bohemia of art, of travel, of poverty, is merely a state wherein one can do what one pleases, and go where one lists without taking into consideration the opinion of Mrs. Pry and Mrs. Censor, and all the other members of that great inquisitorial society.

With a white stone I shall always mark that happy Sunday in my memory. She came quite early, and we breakfasted together. My then landlady did her honour; and, out of the fulness of her generosity, placed upon the table new-laid eggs and a pat of fresh butter, together with a few flowers—all out of a great hamper that had come up the previous day from the country, bringing a flavour of the country with it. Altogether, what with the crisp watercresses, and the little glass dish of honey, and a slice or two of spiced beef artistically garnished with parsley; the tiny jug of cream, the steaming coffee, the warm May sun, the window set wide open and giving upon a miniature grass plot—we felt the repast to be quite a feast, an event in lives so bare of luxury and beauty as ours.

Once I surprised tears welling in Adelaide's eyes, but she laughed and tried to make light of her folly.

"Only we have been so happy," she added, "it seems to me sometimes we never can be so happy again."

When we had finished breakfast, she put on her bonnet, and we went to St. Mary's, Islington, for morning service. After we came out I told her about the woman who had been buried there with the gold pin thrust through her heart; and she took up the idea, and made quite a fanciful little story about it, far different from the real, as we paced slowly home. Then we dined, neither of us caring to eat, and yet both trying to do so, one to please the other; after-

wards we went out by the Great Northern Railway to Wood Green, and walked back by way of Southgate and Colney Hatch and Muswell Hill to Hornsey.

Shall I ever forget that walk, the sweet calm of the Sunday afternoon, the songs of the larks, and the way in which her eyes seemed to follow them almost to the gates of heaven? The air was laden with scents, the hedgerows decked and white with May blossoms, peace seemed everywhere save in my own heart. She was young and I was old; her life was before her, mine was behind me; when she loved, as she was sure to love, there would be beauty and fitness in the feeling; but there was neither beauty nor fitness in the affection which rent my own heart with a pain that was all sorrowful.

I have never paced those lanes since—I hope I never shall again. I have no desire to live over again the bitterness which then filled my soul, and I have still less wish to interpose any commonplace associations between myself and the one romance of a prosaic life.

In the realms of memory still sing on, sweet birds, fill the heavens with melody and the earth with a rapturous delight; still, sweet eyes, follow the flight of the eager songster; still bloom, ye flowers of May; still, ye breezes, waft sweet scents on your balmy breath! It may be winter in those lanes sometimes in reality, but for me—never. In the darkest and dreariest day I can see the sun shining and hear the larks thrilling out their lay, and I can feel again the pain at my heart, which was as that of a new birth; poor heart, so long numb and dead, waked into sensation merely to experience a fresh pang.

Surely no two sadder faces ever looked from the top of Muswell Hill adown the fair prospect which then met the eye. Heaven knows how it may be now! The destructive hand of improvement may have transformed that lovely landscape into a barren waste of tenth-rate streets and shoddy houses; covered the green fields with villas, and cut down the goodly trees. What it was is all that concerns me; for of my own good-will I shall never more behold that stretching landscape, that combination of so many beautiful things.

Stamped on my brain it remains like the recollection of the dear, pensive face of her who walked beside me, like

the memory of that happy, happy day, which was yet one of the saddest of my life.

When we returned we could take nothing save a cup of tea. The morning had gone, and the evening was at hand. For me the sun was westering, and night, I felt with a shiver, was at hand. Tired though we were, we went to church again. It seemed easier to do anything than to talk. Cityward we bent our steps, and through the quiet streets walked leisurely, awed and depressed by the Sabbath stillness, till we reached an old church rich in architectural beauty, in oak carving almost black with age, in brasses placed there in memory of the forgotten dead, in monuments raised to perpetuate the names of men and women who were of those who "make history," in great high square pews, into one of which we were shut by an evil-looking elderly dame. There was a rest about the place; there was something in its aspect which seemed to say, "Generations have suffered and rejoiced, fretted out their little day, and behold they are at peace."

The organ was good and mellow, the choir fairly competent; but the voice, which sang aloud to God that night falteringly, and with exceeding sweetness, was the one voice in all the world to me; as I pause for a moment in my story, I can hear it now.

So I can the words of the text: "Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him, but weep sore for him going away; for he shall return no more, nor see his native country."

As has been said, we were quite alone in the seat; and when for the second time the preacher repeated the sorrowful words written above, Adelaide slipped her hand into mine, and gave it a nervous squeeze. The preacher was not a good one. He had not his business at heart; and I doubt if either of us remembered much of what he said five minutes after we were out of the church.

More slowly than ever we paced the City streets homeward, for our hearts were heavy and our limbs weary. It was Adelaide who first spoke.

"That seemed a strange text for the minister to have made selection of," she said in her soft pretty way; "but I think it do not apply to me—I feel I shall come back quite safe—quite sound—though I am going away."

Her right hand rested on my arm, and I put mine upon it, as I answered :

"No, my dear, you may 'return no more.' An Adelaide Lemberg will, please God, come back safe and well and happy, but after to-night I shall behold the little girl with whom I have passed so many, many pleasant hours—never again."

She understood me in a minute. "I know what you mean. It is not possible for us to stand quite still. I shall be older—know more—have seen much ; yes, it must be that I change. To-day I am not what I was twelve months ago, but in one thing my heart will never be different. It can never know a change for you."

"It will be pleasant for me to believe that," I answered.

"Yes, you must believe that. It could as soon change to my mother, to my brothers, to my little sisters, as to you."

That was it, dear to her after a fashion—less dear than the mother and the brothers and the sisters for whose sake she had ventured out into the world. I had always told myself how foolish I was, yet I never clearly understood how deep was the gulf fixed between us till that moment.

She was going away early the next morning. Her new friends were to call for her about the time I usually went to business, and we had consequently decided to bid each other farewell overnight. Upon that farewell why should I enlarge ? When the last minute came, and we stood hand clasping hand, she broke down a little. She was never a girl who wept loudly or passionately. In her grief she was not demonstrative, so I could just see the tears starting from under her long lashes, as I looked upon her.

"Good-bye ; God bless you, dear," I said.

Then she raised her head and lifted her lips to mine, and kissed me, and it was over.

Time passed away, weeks grew into months, months into years. As it had ever flowed, so my life went on now, a sluggish current which varied not in its course, summer or winter, spring or autumn. I grew older rapidly—as I fancy at some periods of their existences, at some crises in their experiences, men and women often do. I went to the *office as usual*. I spent my evenings as of yore. I *frequented old book-stalls* just as I had always done, pick-

ing up now and then a rare volume offered at a price I could afford. No fresh amount of energy seemed to develop in me; on the contrary, no wild visions of making a fortune, of rushing into speculation and transforming myself into a millionaire, able to benefit the little brothers and sisters and widowed mother ever lured me into even a moment's contemplation of the impossible.

It was she who alone could make the fortune; she who was destined to prove fairy godmother to the dear ones she loved so well. She had everything before her. I could not read her letters and fail to understand she was destined to make a great success. With genius, industry, youth, competent advisers, she had but to abide her time—appear—conquer.

I knew her life almost as well as though she had spent it under the same roof with me. She told me everything, I think, that affected her prospects. The hours she studied the parts she was best fitted for, the languages she was endeavouring to master, the people she met, the countries she beheld.

On my own side I did not remain quite idle. Even to write to her it was necessary that I should know something of the operas of which she spoke, have some comprehension of the difficulties she had to overcome, some means of testing her powers against those of the great singers of the day; and accordingly by degrees I gathered together quite a little library of books relating to musical celebrities, and learned, so far as written words could teach, how this contralto had made her name, how that soprano rose into favour. I grew learned in musical terms, and could have stood a competitive examination concerning the *libretto* of every opera that had ever been popular.

At first it was all like wandering through dreamland. Light reading of any kind had formed little part of my studies; and indeed it was only when I recalled the fact that all these apparently trivial annals, all the little ins and outs of artistic intrigue—struggle, failure, and success—had affected, for good or for evil, the lives of men and women, that I could concentrate my attention on the text. To my foolish ignorance, at first this art existence seemed a poor sort of life, unworthy the serious attention of people possessing immortal souls, but I knew I was

wrong; I knew that what appeared superior wisdom was indeed the very silliness of narrow prejudice.

I had but to look around, but for a few hours to leave the great City and contemplate the world God Himself did not disdain to create, in order to perceive how indissolubly grace and beauty have in the decrees of the Almighty been wedded to strength and greatness. I thought also of the tender softness, the subtle poetry, I had felt steal over me when, for the first time—herself still unknown, unseen—the spell of Adelaide's gift stirred within me sorrowful wells of emotion, the depths of which were never sounded before; and then, further, I remembered the lonely barrenness of an existence devoted almost entirely to procuring the means of keeping soul and body together, relieved merely by the recreation of reading the thoughts of men whose hearts had apparently been as solitary—of compulsion—as my own.

Occasionally, during the course of the opera season, I made my way up into the gallery, and, by dint of a judicious selection, managed to hear most of the great artistes of the day.

Truth to tell, these expeditions left me generally somewhat sad. I could not but wish Adelaide to succeed; and yet if she did succeed, I felt I could be nothing to her, scarcely even a friend. I did not, of course, know at how much favourite singers calculated their yearly incomes, but it was impossible for me to doubt that in comparison to myself they were millionaires. Nay, even from what she said in her letters, I knew that already Adelaide must be a source of considerable profit to the person who had undertaken to bring her out.

Just before the "Home and Foreign" raised my salary to that one hundred and fifty pounds mentioned in the first chapter of this story, she sent me a locket containing her portrait, which could not have cost much less than one half of my then yearly salary.

And the likeness was not that of the girl who had stood in my doorway, who had walked with me adown Muswell Hill, who had slipped her hand into mine as we sat side by side in the old City church. An older, a handsomer, a cleverer Adelaide; but not just the same! Ah, that, however, I had before realised, was inevitable.

Not long, not very long, that is to say, after Mr. Amriott's legacy was left to me, she returned to England. She came all in a hurry, to stay only for a short time, to appear in a new opera, to take the place, indeed, if my memory serve me faithfully, of a favourite singer who, having met with some accident, was unable to fulfil the first portion of her engagement.

I did not know her when she ran into my room one Sunday afternoon. I declare, till she spoke, I could trace nothing in common between this new Adelaide and the old. She seemed at first so much more womanly; she had grown, strange to say, so extremely foreign-looking that, if it had not been for the remembered tones, the clinging hands, the caressing voice, she might have been any richly-dressed fashionable woman come to honour my poor house.

She was rapturous in her greeting, full of delight at my good fortune, triumphant concerning her own prospects.

"This time," she said, "it is all so much in haste and hurry; I shall have no single moment scarcely to myself. I go abroad again almost on the instant. I only come now because the composer he knows me, and knows I understand his music. But next season I hope to come for good—and then—ah! again we can be as we were once formerly, when I made the tea at madame's. With all their troubles they were sweet days, those so happy. You must hear me sing. I shall send you a box; promise me now—make a faithful promise—that it shall be that you come.

I told her I would go; but not to any box or stall. Hidden away amongst the audience, she might be certain I should be present at every possible performance when she appeared, and with this assurance she was fain to be satisfied.

That I did not fulfil my promise, I should be ashamed to confess here, if I had not prefaced it by a confession to her.

As I sat up there in the gallery, and watched her and heard her, I felt as if my heart would burst. I could not bear it.

When the applause began, I covered my face with my hands, to hide the tears I vainly tried to repress. My previous life had unfitted me for such a scene, my experience was too narrow to grasp so wonderful a transformation.

Her singing was, to my ears, as the singing of an angel ; but I could not identify the artist, who stood the cynosure of all those eyes, with the little girl dressed in mournful black I had known so long ago.

Two gentlemen sat close beside me—men evidently accustomed to the stage, and matters therewith connected.

"What do you think of her?" asked one of the other, a little doubtfully, and I strained my ears to catch the reply.

"She has a heavenly voice," was the answer, spoken with the decision of one accustomed to have his words listened to, "and it has been well trained, and her appearance is in her favour ; but she can't act. If she could only act as well as she can sing, she might carry the town by storm."

I walked very slowly home that night pondering as I went.

CHAPTER VII.

BESSIE.

THE courteous reader—how I love that phrase, borrowed from a time when writers were slow, and such few readers as "gave their minds to study" (another suggestive expression) very sure !—the courteous reader, whose attention I shall have been happy enough to engage, can now, either sympathetically, or in a spirit of pitying derision, understand why it came to pass that, in the furnishing of my little drawing-room, I took more interest and pleasure than in anything else connected with my new abode.

Since that time I have often experienced a fine feeling of contempt for my own ignorance, when memory has given me back the look of that apartment decorated for the reception of a "Queen of Song." A modern baby might laugh in its sleeve at the thought of such simplicity ; and, indeed, a modern baby is wiser in many respects than I was then. Of the world I knew literally nothing. What seemed to me luxury must have appeared to those accustomed to the glories of upholstery the barest simplicity ; *but of all comprehension of that kind I was then happily innocent.*

In my case it would have proved the acme of folly to be wise. Ignorance was a pleasure to me. Like a child I set out my house, and deemed it beautiful—and made my make-believe pay—and felt quite sure it was all real, and enjoyed myself exceedingly; because what I was doing was for her whom I loved with a devotion perhaps no prosperous and accepted suitor ever knew.

There was not a thing I did, during the whole of that happy time of merciful illusion, but bore some relation to Adelaide. Sometimes I pleased myself with thinking if I had married young, and been left a widower with one only child, a daughter, I should have loved to deck out a place for her as I strove to deck The Snuggery for Adelaide.

She loved primroses; and I planted, with my own hands, a dell, with those modest flowers and sweet tender violets. She once told me she delighted in daisies; and, therefore, I refrained from having a barren and unprofitable little mead ploughed up. She had an affection for bantams; and I, accordingly, introduced some of those ridiculous birds into the poultry-yard. Ah, me! it was happy work, and a happy, happy time. To the end of my life I shall associate the fine bright autumnal weather with the ingathering of a harvest of satisfaction and content.

It was then I explored the neighbourhood around Reedbourne so thoroughly that even now, I think, I could draw a map of the roads and footpaths which might, in its accuracy, compete with the productions of Ordnance surveyors. I said to myself, "I will bring her here. I will take her there. She shall behold that fair expanse of country from this rising ground, and saunter across the meadows with me, till that pensive bit of river landscape surprises her fancy. We will walk up the hill where the trees almost meet across the road; and she shall, when the snow is crystallised on the branches, see with dazzled eyes a fairer and more wonderful transformation scene than ever was designed by any human craftsman."

Away out in the world she was working, struggling, succeeding. Stranded in that remote nook of lotus-land I was idly dreaming; every effect of light and shade, of cloud and sunshine, of rippling water and gloomy pine, seeming fairer and more beautiful, because some day her eyes were to look upon them.

Thus walking, planning, dreaming, the days glided by the rich tints of autumn faded from out the land; beside the streams the alders stood bare and dark; in the woods the fir and pine cones littered the ground; the deep purple flush had died from off the heather; the brackens were withered and brown; the mornings were dark and cold, and the evenings long and pleasant, to my thinking at least, as with easy chair drawn close beside a blazing wood-fire, giving out a faint aromatic perfume, I sat—my lamp well shaded—reading the thoughts of men whose words were, to my heart, as the sound of music, sweet, solemn, tender.

Yes, it was the most restful part of all the year; the quiet time which comes between the sleep of the life-giving sap and its awakening. I had become accustomed to my new experiences. I had grown to love my strange home. I had dropped as naturally into this fresh position as though used to it for years. Christmas was at hand, coming quite near, when an advent occurred which—almost more, indeed, than the event of Mr. Amriott's legacy—changed the current of my existence.

A very unimportant event at first sight, certainly; nothing more than the arrival of my young niece to "keep house" for her bachelor uncle.

Never probably did uncle know really less of a niece than I of Miss Bessie. When my father died Bessie's mother went out to seek her fortune as a governess. She was older than I by some years; and, after a little time, dropped into a very good situation, where she was less governess than companion, less companion than friend.

The family she entered paid her a high salary; treated her with every consideration; took her abroad with them, and, after a fashion, made her a very fine lady. She was so fine, at all events, that eventually she decided upon cutting her mother and myself. We asked her for nothing; but perhaps she feared we should do so, or imagined the fact of acknowledging such very poor relations might militate against her worldly advancement.

Whatever the reason chanced to be, she dropped us, and for a long time we heard nothing whatever about her—nothing, in fact, till she walked in one day "straight from India," as she explained, dressed in widow's weeds, and holding by the hand her little girl Bessie.

She had been left badly off—that, as she came back to us, goes, of course, without saying ; she had been left very badly off indeed, and she was, though she did not then know it, dying. We were so poor ourselves that we could do little more than give her a shelter ; but she soon did something for herself, by managing to get Bessie admitted into an orphanage.

Not long afterwards she died ; and, as her small income died with her, we were sorely crippled by the expenses of her illness and funeral. But my mother was happy that she had come to us at last ; that her own hands had held water to the parched lips ; that her only daughter was not alone amongst strangers when she breathed her last. We never removed Bessie from the orphanage. It would have been madness for us to attempt such a piece of quixotism. We could only have given the child scanty fare and poor clothing ; we had to pinch ourselves in order to pay our humble way ; and my mother felt the love she could bestow might be dearly bought with the loss of all the advantages her grand-daughter was enjoying. So we left her at the school, seeing her as often as we could, but learning very little of her nature.

In course of time she followed in her mother's footsteps—only at a respectful distance. She obtained a situation as nursery governess ; and as she had not a penny of her own—except what she earned—or a friend in the world besides myself, I managed, by dint of considerable economy, to insure a few hundred pounds for her in the event of my death.

When I could arrange to do so, I was in the habit of taking her out for a few hours' pleasure. Sometimes we went into St. James's Park to feed the ducks ; sometimes to Hyde Park to see the great people driving there ; sometimes a little trip down the river ; anything, in fact, which was at once accessible and cheap.

It never occurred to me on these occasions that we had not much in common, as, indeed, how should there be, with that waste of years stretching between ? I thought her a good little girl, and I felt sorry for her, and was wont to sympathise in all her troubles, and agree that her various employers *could not be at all "nice people."* She had always *much to say about them ; and how tiresome the children*

were, and how difficult the mothers were to please. Bessie did not keep her places very long ; but as she did not profess to be able to teach young ladies, and as Miss Edith and Miss Florence, and the other baby misses, had a habit of shooting suddenly beyond the nursery, that fact caused me little astonishment.

She was so delighted to be with me, so grateful for the small kindness I could show, that I contracted a sort of affection for her ; and when my legacy arrived, I set a certain sum aside for Bessie as a future marriage portion, and determined that the next time she was "between two situations," as she expressed her very frequent worldly condition, I would take her a trip to Paris, where I trusted her knowledge of conversational French might serve for both of us.

The idea of the continental visit enchanted her. She could talk of nothing but Versailles and the Tuileries whenever we walked out together ; and though at first I had merely treated the matter as a mere suggestion, she soon converted it into an absolute promise.

"But are you certain you will be able to make yourself understood, Bessie ?" I asked. "You remember you must not depend upon me."

"Make myself understood ?" repeated Bessie. "Why I am always talking French."

And so it was settled that I was "some day" to take her to Paris.

All this time it never struck me as a desirable arrangement to propose that when I was settled in The Snuggery Bessie should take up her abode there also ; but it struck my fair niece, and finding that I did not broach the subject, she worked round to it herself.

She was miserable in a situation ; I could not think how wretched she was. While I had so little money she would not vex me by telling me all she had to endure ; but now, surely, surely I would take pity on her ?

Of course it ended in her coming. I did not want her. Certainly the arrangement was one I should never have thought of proposing, or of agreeing to, if I could have avoided doing so ; but how was I to object ? how could I suffer my own selfish and recluse habits to stand between this child and happiness ?

She was the nearest relative I had in the world ; and

though I considered it a mistake to insist that, because a man or woman is your relative, he or she has a right to bore one to death, still I was so painfully conscious of most of my opinions being at variance with those society has agreed to adopt, that I felt diffident about proposing any other plan for Bessie's comfort.

It was on the first day of January that Bessie arrived. I had broken the news of her advent—which was received with disfavour—to the person who had kindly consented to act for me in the double capacity of housekeeper and servant. I had convinced myself that her room was warm and comfortable. I had ordered such little additions to the accustomed dinner as I thought might please the appetite of a girl accustomed to school-room fare; and then I went out to the station to meet her.

Such rapture! such kissing! All the way to The Snuggery she held my hand in hers, and said at intervals, "Dear, dear uncle!" and "I am so happy!" and "You are so kind!"

She seemed almost delirious with joy, like a dog just let off the chain. The Snuggery was the loveliest place she had ever seen; her bed-chamber the "darlingest" room in England; the cat was the friendliest creature possible, and my study the cosiest nook imaginable. She said the toast was cold, and made me fresh, screening her face from the fire the while. She placed the lamp where its light fell best on the page of the book I was reading. She never spoke unless I addressed her, except when she muttered, "How delightful this is!" She produced a dainty bit of crochet-work, and seemed to be doing wonders with her glistening needle; and when she said good-night, she lingered over her words and her kiss as though she were leaving some blessing behind.

"Poor little Bessie," I thought, "how little it takes to make you happy!" and I read on, feeling that I rather liked myself in the character of benefactor, and considering that if all personal sacrifices proved as little irksome, it would be rather easy and pleasant to be good.

Next morning she was down before my housekeeper, Mrs. Brooker, and went out to explore the place ere the sun rose. *At breakfast she chattered about the cocks and hens, the ducks, the lovely, lovely pigeons, the dear old*

horse, and that delightful cow. She was fain also occasionally to get up and hug me, and though I said, "That will do, Bessie," more than once, she felt it incumbent upon her to take me in her arms, and imprint kisses upon my scattered locks ere entering upon what I suppose she considered the duties of the day.

In the pursuit of those duties she turned out all my drawers, and upset the methodical arrangement of my clothes; she rearranged my bookshelves, and for a month I could never lay hand on a volume I wanted.

How Bessie worried me for about a week no one can imagine! She was so eager for work, she found occasion to use her needle where certainly needle was not wanted, She made out dirt existed where not even a speck of dust had ever met my eye; and she so harried Mrs. Brooker—not perhaps a quite dependable person, but an admirable cook and servant, nevertheless—that at the end of a fortnight she gave me notice to leave.

"As for you, sir," she said with dignity, "a child might please you, and a purfessed cook never ask a better master; but Miss Richards would make a saint commit suicide."

"She drinks gin, uncle, and she steals things," explained Bessie, full of that detective spirit which conduces so greatly to the misery of households.

With a sigh, I gave up the argument. Mrs. Brooker went, and a servant of Bessie's own choosing came.

What dinners we had then! what an untidy house—what dirt—what irregularity! If we had spent our lives in a state of chronic removal, we could not have been more miserable. Our vegetables were either boiled to smash or brought up hard as stones. The water was usually smoked, the coffee weak, the tea bitter. Bessie's puddings were either sticky or curdy. Sometimes the bed-chambers were not tidied up until the evening, our meals were irregular, our rooms dusty and unswept; in short, at last I said,

"Bessie, your domestic does not seem to me to be much of a manager. We had better have Mrs. Brooker back again."

"Of course, uncle, if you like to be robbed," she answered, with a judicious application of pocket-handkerchief to her eyes.

"My dear," I rejoined, "I am not at all sure she ever did rob me, but I am quite certain she made the house a great deal more comfortable than your *protégée*."

"Then by all means have your favourite back again," said Miss Bessie, with a near approach to a "flounce."

"I mean to have her," I answered, meekly.

Accordingly we had her back. She was very glad to return. I was delighted to reinstate her. The arrangement entered into was that Mrs. Brooker should take entire control, and Miss Richards refrain from interference; and that the new state of things should commence under agreeable circumstances, I told Bessie to pack her box, and took her off to France.

There had been times since Bessie came to Reedbourne when I found myself troubled with doubts as to whether she were really the clever and capable young lady she represented herself to be; but after one day's experience of her vaunted knowledge of the French language I doubted no longer. I knew my niece to be a superficial and conceited little impostor.

"Well, it was a disappointment; but what could I do? There she was on my hands, for me to make the best of that I could. We had not an idea in common. Never did I imagine that any one who knew how to read could be so densely, hopelessly ignorant.

When we returned home, and settled down again into the pleasant monotony of a country life, I earnestly entreated her to commence some regular course of study, to try to increase her knowledge and enlarge her mind. I asked if she would like to take lessons in music and French. I suggested she had commenced so young to earn her own living that hitherto there could have been but scant leisure for her to improve herself, and to all I said she gave a ready assent—a far too ready assent.

"I never had a minute to myself, uncle," she remarked. "I was always either teaching the children or walking out with them, or doing needlework or something. Ah, it was a very hard life! you cannot think how hard it was."

"We must see that it is easier now," I answered, cheerfully; "and I believe, if you devote a few hours each day to improving yourself, that at the end of six months you will be astonished at the progress you have made."

Bessie was quite sure she would—she was so sure that she immediately went out and made some purchases in order to begin the great work of cultivating her intellect. She thought she would not take any lessons, she felt confident she could teach herself, and she “was so old she knew she should feel ashamed for anyone to learn how ignorant she was.” It all sounded very well; and I confess when I saw copy-books, drawing materials, music-books full of the stiffest and blackest exercises, and all the usual educational appliances, unpacked and placed in a prominent position on the sideboard, I thought I had misjudged my relative, and that she really did mean to wrestle with the difficulties of learning, and overcome them.

Vain delusion! For a few days Bessie made a feint of grappling with Czerny, of studying perspective, of reading French, of borrowing from my shelves the heaviest and most abstruse volumes she could find; but after that she found that Mrs. Brooker’s occasional intrusions into the dining-room distracted her mind, and began to feel sure the noise of those “dreadful exercises” must disturb me. For this last reason she decided to practise when I was out for my morning or afternoon stroll, and for the former reason she carried her books upstairs; and, spite of all my remonstrances, elected to “study” in her bed-chamber. There she used to remain for hours together; but as I found she made, so far as it was possible to discover, no progress in any single branch of learning, I may be pardoned for concluding that she spent those periods of seclusion in reading the silliest novels obtainable at the local library, or in writing letters, for which occupation she had—like many young ladies—a perfect mania. Her pianoforte practice consisted of playing the easiest part of some easy air over and over as fast as possible. To my own knowledge, she never mastered the second part of “The Swiss Boy;” while as for her singing—but I pass over in silence the agony my niece’s *mezzo-soprano* voice caused me.

Through all that time I had a little private sorrow of my own, which caused me—lest personal annoyance should induce general injustice towards others—to display greater forbearance than I might have thought necessary had my own heart been quite at ease; and I therefore expressed neither disappointment nor surprise when I came fully to

understand that Bessie was a lazy, greedy, deceitful little puss, who must have set a bad example to every child she taught, and proved a thorn in the flesh of every mistress she served.

To my mind there was scarcely a fault the girl did not possess. She was too idle to mend her own clothes; she would pin the braid round her dress rather than devote a few minutes to putting it on properly. It was her habit to come down always late for breakfast, yawning, as if she had not closed her eyes all night; she would sit before a fire, and let it go out sooner than trouble herself to rise and put on coals. She was greedy too, bringing no healthy and thankful appetite to regular meals, but declaring, unless there happened to be some dish she especially effected, that "she was not hungry;" that she could only "eat the least atom," "the tiniest weeniest bit," yet managing to make a good dinner after all, if the pudding chanced to prove palatable, or any second dish was served which she liked.

Between her and Mrs. Brooker there waged so bitter a war that, as I heard subsequently, Miss Bessie was unable to procure a morsel of food from the pantry without the housekeeper's knowledge and consent.

It was perhaps for this reason she went about with a supply of cakes, nuts, fruit, or sweetmeats in her pocket; answering a question, if suddenly addressed, with her mouth full, and scattering crumbs of biscuit and other fragments of food about the carpets, whenever she produced a letter or handkerchief.

All this was hateful to me, but it was not so hateful as her utter want of comprehension of everything exquisite in poetry, legend, and Nature. For her there was no glamour in the snow, no witchery in the sunshine. She asked me what Poe's verses meant, and said candidly she considered Coleridge an "old stupid." If you repeated to her a touching story, a graceful legend, she would at once cap it with some foolish tale she had heard at school or been told by some old nurse. If one read to her a pathetic chapter out of a favourite book, she would say, "she had no doubt it was very nice, but for her part she did like something lively." She objected to Dickens and Thackeray, remarking, "they are so dry," to which last word she evidently

attached some different meaning from that understood by most persons ; whilst as for scenery, the finest road to her in the world was that where she could meet the greatest number of men and women—the former preferably, naturally ; shop-windows were to her a finer spectacle than the view from the top of the Hog's Back or St. Martha's Hill, whilst as for the sight of the river, she declared frankly she hated it, unless she could be out on it, in a boat with a pleasant party, which last contingency she was kind enough to hint might produce a favourable modification in her opinions.

It may be that in other counties of England there are banks sprinkled with lovelier flowers, dells where more wonderful tangles of bramble and honeysuckle and wild roses are to be met with than in Surrey. People who know more of the favoured spots of our country than I pretend to do tell me of places where what we consider exotics grow freely in the open air, and the cherished plants of our gardens are to be met with blooming by the wayside. Some day, some happy day, I hope to visit these haunts, word-pictures of which have been oftentimes made for me by dreamers like myself ; but when my eyes do behold myrtles and camellias flourishing in a climate where frosts are not bitter enough to destroy, I do not think my heart will prove disloyal to the memory of those gently-gliding streams of Surrey, flowing on calmly beautiful between banks starry with such floweret gems as never decked a diadem, set out with such varieties of colour as never gardener massed in a parterre ; gay and beautiful, yet restful to the eye ; bright and sweet, yet scarcely so two days together with the same brightness and the same sweetness.

Changing, ever changing ; one blossom replaced by another, one flower blooming for its short hour, and then giving place to another more exquisite still. That is bedding out if you like, gentlemen of the Horticultural Society, all among the soft green grass, and the springing rushes and the quivering reeds ; on the banks where the shoots from the old elm-trees are putting out their freshest and tenderest buds, and the leaves are still lying brown and bare as they dropped in the autumn weather ; down in the deep dells, which in the winter-time were pools of water ; there in copse and hedgerow, in meadow, in marsh,

in the distant woods, beside the streamlets, and on the bosom of the rivers, are flowers that we should regard as pearls of price if they were not strewed with Nature's lavish generosity round and about every path we tread.

To all these things Bessie seemed mentally blind. If I admired the peeping primroses, the delicate mosses, the soft green of the eglantine, the fairy tassels of the larch, my niece said, "It is all very nice," or "Lor' !" as the mood was on her.

The trembling tottergrass never drew an exclamation of delight from her lips ; the dainty ferns put out their fronds in vain, for as she passed she failed to notice their beauty ; the trembling aspens had no voice which could appeal to her deaf senses ; and the noble swans, sailing up the silvery Thames to the bosky aits where the willows were reflected from the calm clear water, suggested to her no other idea than the remembrance of some transformation scene wherein the principal fairy floated on the stage in a gilt shell drawn over a mimic lake by two artificial birds.

There was not in all this rural life a sight or sound which affected or delighted my young niece. Day by day we drifted further and further apart. No topic of conversation that interested me seemed intelligible to her. No walk around all that lovely neighbourhood appeared pleasant in her eyes, save that which led through Reedbourne to the railway station, or a winding dreary highway conducting to the nearest town.

By degrees it dawned upon my understanding that Bessie was sadly discontented with life at The Snuggery ; all the charm of novelty was dispersed ; all the illusions she had cherished were dissipated.

I do not know what she had expected, perhaps she did not know herself, but at any rate she was disappointed. She did not tell me this. I failed to perceive all at once that she found existence fearfully, horribly dull, but after a while I saw the girl was miserable, and then the meaning of many hitherto dark utterances became clear.

It had not entered my mind to wonder that the inhabitants of Reedbourne did not call upon me. On the contrary, I should have wondered very much if they had, but Bessie professed herself lost in astonishment at my lack of all acquaintances.

"You do not even know the clergymen," she remarked, with a little pout.

"Well, no," I answered, "it is hardly my place to call upon them."

"But aren't you surprised, uncle, they have never called upon you?" she persisted.

Now, to speak quite candidly, I had experienced a sensation as near surprise in consequence of this omission as it was in my nature to feel on such a subject. The reader may remember that when I first sauntered through the village, I met a reverend gentleman who, I imagined, might sit in my modest study and exchange ideas about the books—collected through many laborious and lonely years—which lined it.

I had now been located many months at The Snuggery, and knew no more of my spiritual instructor than could be gathered from the sermons he preached. At first I expected him—I looked for his coming and for that of his aide-de-camp, the curate, whose worldly belongings had excited the contempt of two of Reedbourne's unlovely daughters; then I forgot to remember them except on such occasions as they were recalled to my memory by seeing them in the street or in church; then I heard by chance, a silent listener in the train to a conversation carried on between two of the inhabitants, that as "a certain regiment did not dance," so the clergy of Reedbourne "did not visit."

There were exceptions to that rule, however, apparently, for I often saw the vicar, and less frequently the curate, entering the house which had been Squire Blunt's, where the successful De Field now resided.

One thing, however, was quite certain: the clergy did not visit *me*; and feeling in no way bound regularly to attend the parish church, which Mr. Rivers was in the habit of touchingly referring to as "our beloved parish church," I had fallen into a habit of wandering afar off for religious nourishment—straying, in fact, into any pasture which promised even a few blades of refreshing herbage.

This was a serious trial to my niece. She felt quite certain if I would show some interest in parish matters that Rector and Co. would greet me with effusion.

"It would bring you into contact with all sorts of people, uncle," she said. "That is the way Mr. Dodman

got into society at Camberwell. Maggie told me so herself."

"But then, you see, Bessie, I am not Mr. Dodman."

"No," agreed my niece slowly; and her tone implied that though the fact could not be helped, it was one to be regretted.

"Don't you think," she began, after a pause devoted to that particular sort of reverie in which Bessie was an adept, "don't you think that if you go on this way, week after week, and month after month, never visiting, never calling upon anybody, never having anybody calling upon you—"

"Well, Bessie?" I asked, as she hesitated.

"That you will find some day you are very lonely?" finished my niece, changing, as I quite understood, the form and substance of the suggestion.

"I do not believe I shall," I answered. "You must remember, Bessie, I have been accustomed to what you call loneliness."

It was not necessary for me to add that I doubted whether asking for the secretaryship of a local coal club would introduce me to congenial society.

Constant dripping wears away a stone; and at length Bessie's recurrence to my lack of acquaintances made an impression even upon my dense selfishness.

Stupidly I had imagined that what contented me would content a young girl; and I confess it was only by slow degrees I understood that when Bessie referred to my loneliness she really meant her own; when she pathetically pictured a dreary future without visitors or visiting, she merely intended politely to convey to me some idea of how fearfully she was bored.

As I have intimated, all this knowledge was borne in upon me gradually, and at length I quite understood her tactics.

"It must be dull for her," I considered, as I looked across the river to Thamesford, one of the prettiest villages in England, and then an idea suddenly occurred to me.

"Good Heavens! is she, I wonder, as tired of me as I am of her?" to which succeeded another: "Perhaps she is more tired?" which was indeed the case.

At dinner that day, I said,

"Bessie, I have been thinking that you must find it somewhat lonely here—"

"O, uncle, you are not going to send me away! You surely would never be so cruel as to make me go out as governess again! I will do all you tell me. I will study, indeed I will," she interrupted, evidently more alive to her own shortcomings than I had ever before seen her.

"No, my dear," I answered, "you are not very fond of teaching, I know; and moreover, I don't think you are very competent to be a teacher. But you must be lonely; and as I do not see how I can give you society in the neighbourhood, I have been wondering whether you would like to ask that Miss Dodman you talk so much about to spend a little time with—"

I never was permitted to finish my sentence. Bessie rushed at me—I can employ no other phrase—and, flinging her arms round my neck, embraced me with effusion. I was the "dearest darlinest uncle," she declared, "in the whole universe. She did not know how to thank me. Maggie was the nicest girl in the world; Maggie was the one thing wanting to make The Snuggery perfect; Maggie—"

"You have upset the salt-cellar, and you are spilling the gravy," I remarked.

"And it is unlucky to spill the salt," she said, taking up some and flinging it over her left shoulder (there was not a superstitious rite Bessie failed to observe: so far as I had been able to judge, superstition was her only religion); "but nothing can be unlucky if Maggie is coming. O you dear, dear, dear—" ending the sentence with a rapturous kiss instead of an orthodox substantive.

"I wish, Bessie," I observed, "you could be brought to comprehend that, while not wishing to undervalue these tokens of affection, I am not accustomed to such violent demonstrations of attachment."

"But I am so happy, uncle."

"I am delighted to hear it. Suppose you let me be happy too."

"I will do anything you ask me. O, won't Maggie be enchanted! I may write to her this afternoon, may I not? She will count the hours till she comes. You cannot think

how nice she is, and she is *so* clever. She is able to do everything ; you will like her, I know."

"I suppose it does not matter very much whether I like or dislike her," I answered, a little ungraciously.

No person would have imagined that the listless, slow-footed, discontented-looking Bessie of the morning was the bright, active, smiling Bessie of the afternoon.

She danced up and down the stairs. She dashed off her letter, and, though it was a warm day, started out to post the invitation. All the evening I heard furniture being pushed about, and tacks being hammered into valance-boards and toilet-tables.

Mrs. Brooker, going up to see what all the noise could be about, remarked, in tones loud enough to reach my ears,

"Lor', Miss, what a mess you are making ! Leave the room to me, and I will settle it up."

But Bessie would not leave the room ; and, as I passed the door, I had ocular proof that she was indeed making a mess.

Quicker than I should have imagined the letter could have been delivered, an answer came. It was written by Miss Dodman ; and such portions as Bessie read aloud were to the effect that her mamma felt much obliged by my invitation, and would gladly allow her to visit Reed-bourne ; that I must indeed be good, kind, thoughtful uncle ; that Bessie was the most fortunate girl in the world to be my niece ; that Miss Dodman was delighted at the prospect of seeing Bessie, and that the writer soon hoped to "fold her in a fond embrace."

Various passages were not read out to me ; but, from the giggles with which Bessie perused them, I concluded that they had reference to some silly jokes and secrets between the young ladies.

"See what a nice hand she writes, uncle," said Bessie, presenting me with a half-sheet, whereon Miss Dodman stated :

"So I will add no more, darling, as I hope to see your dear old face so very, very soon, except that I am my beloved Bessie's most fond and affectionate

"MAGGIE."

"Good gracious !" I thought, "*what is this infliction I*

have brought upon myself?" And, with a groan, I entered my own sanctum and shut the door.

The very next day Miss Dodman followed her letter in person. Bessie went to the station to meet her, and the two came back together, with great state, in a fly. When I beheld the size of the trunk under which the driver staggered, my heart misgave me.

"She is never going away again," I decided; "she means to remain here for the full term of her natural life;" and then I stood face to face with Bessie's most fond and affectionate friend.

"Uncle, this is Maggie," was my niece's informal mode of presentation; and Miss Dodman shook hands with me, and said how much obliged she felt for my kindness in asking her, and how glad she was to see Bessie again, and how lovely the country was looking.

"I had never been down the South-Western line before," she explained, and was proceeding to other conversational efforts when Bessie interposed and carried her upstairs, in order to take off her bonnet before tea. All the affairs of the nation might have been settled during that process of bonnet removal. Chitter, chatter, chitter, chatter—there was a noise in the house as when a flock of sparrows hold their parliament.

The room appropriated to Miss Dodman was directly over my study; and through the open windows there came a continuous buzz, like the busy humming of a thousand bees. If they had been separated for twenty years, it seemed to me, those girls must have exhausted every incident of the period, in that conversation carried on at express speed.

They came down to tea with arms entwined round each other, and at intervals during that meal Bessie pressed her friend's hand with effusion.

"We must seem very silly to you, Mr. Cheverley," said Miss Dodman, ingenuously; "but Bessie and I have been always such friends."

This explanation was frankly and nicely spoken. It was at once an apology and an excuse, and caused me to look *with more favour*, or, perhaps I should rather say, *less disfavour*, upon this new troubler of my peace.

People who admired her style considered the young lady

pretty, "*very* pretty indeed," Bessie told me. I had another form before my mind's eye very different indeed from that which graced the tea-table; but still I could not help seeing that Miss Dodman was, after a fashion, good-looking. She had a clear red-and-white complexion, blue eyes, light wavy, not to say frizzy, hair, white, even teeth, and a somewhat winning smile. It was not a refined face there was nothing classical about her features; but she looked a cheerful, frank, amiable girl, and she had an expression of innocence and guilelessness which struck me as agreeable. She seemed accustomed to make herself useful, for she was always offering to do or fetch something, and then apologising for the liberty taken, with the words,

"I forgot I was not at home."

After tea, when we repaired to the drawing-room I had furnished with a view to the reception of a far different visitor, Bessie said,

"Now, dear, you must play something;" and then I understood what had helped to make Miss Dodman's box so heavy.

Such thick music-books—such piles of "*pieces*"—as she and Bessie appeared laden with on the threshold! I turned sick at heart. Bad enough it had been to hear Bessie profane the instrument bought for the pleasure of another performer; but after the first she troubled my piano only by fits and starts, and besides was so wretched a musician as to be almost beneath notice and contempt.

Here, however, was a horse of quite another colour—a young lady who manifestly did play a great many arrangements and fantasias, and Heaven knows what beside—a young lady who said to me, as I relieved her of her burden,

"Bessie told me yours was such a lovely piano, I could not resist the temptation of bringing all my music. Ours is such a wretched, old thing; the keys are so worn they would do for egg-spoons."

From which I inferred the Dodmans were not rich, though Bessie had represented them as living in good style.

Miss Dodman played very well, though I cannot say she either charmed or pleased my ear. Perhaps she was shrewd enough to guess this fact, for after a little time she rose, and, closing the instrument, declared she would not torment me any more.

"The moment papa comes in he says, 'Now shut up that thing, and don't let there be any row of practising while I am in the house ;'" and the young lady laughed as she repeated this utterance. "If I may," she went on, "I should like to play on this lovely piano when you are 'out of the house ;' but I do not want to be a nuisance, and I know all gentlemen in their hearts hate music."

Then I was obliged to answer that the music she made was not to be hated ; but I am afraid I spoke coldly, for she went to the window, and looked out upon the lawn for a little while, and did not talk much afterwards until she and Bessie went upstairs to bed.

Hours later, when I sought my own room, I perceived that the door of Bessie's bed-chamber stood open, and heard still in full progress, in Miss Dodman's apartment, that even babble of chatter which had previously so amazed me.

As I walked along the passage Bessie caught the sound of my step, and exclaiming,

"Hush—there's uncle!" a dead and unnatural silence immediately ensued.

But it did not last long. Before I could place my candle on the dressing-table the swish-swish-swish of talk recommenced ; and whenever I awoke I heard still a noise as if another weir had been added to those already in the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS DODMAN.

TIME went on. In that quiet valley the days glided away with so little of event to mark their passage, it was only when the summer came one realised spring had departed—only when the snow fell one awoke to the fact that the golden grain was garnered.

For me, after Miss Dodman's arrival, life flowed more smoothly than had previously been the case since that evil hour when Bessie came to reside with me—ill-omened phrase—for good.

If the evil of a niece had to be endured—and I saw no way of getting rid of it—why, Miss Dodman was a great assistance in enabling one to bear the incubus. With the “dearest of dears” in the house, Bessie’s peculiarities did not shoulder mine so frequently as formerly. Her “old darling”—another term of affection—proved a sort of buffer between my niece and myself. I could not observe, indeed, much, if any, improvement in Bessie’s habits. She was still as lazy, as useless, as untidy, as greedy, as silly, as ever; but having once relinquished all hope of reforming these evils, it seemed a comfort to transfer the annoyance to another, who looked with the kindest eyes and the most smiling face upon her friend’s shortcomings. A vague idea of asking Miss Dodman to remain at The Snuggery as companion to Bessie flitted through my mind, but happily I refrained from clothing it in words.

I would not bind myself to anything. I would do nothing irrevocable. Perhaps the Dodmans might ask Bessie to pay them a return visit (they had often taken pity upon her before when she was out of a situation); and if they did, I should—blessed possibility!—have the house to myself for a whole winter.

Never again, I knew, could The Snuggery seem to me what it had done in the fine autumnal weather when I decked the rooms for a visitor who never came.

Never came, and who never now could come! No more—no more! In the past the girl Adelaide lay buried. There was no Adelaide for me now, such as my fancy remembered her. She was married—she belonged to a husband—her letters were not as the letters of old. It had been a pleasant dream, but it was ended. She was a great lady now—the Baroness Aronheim—wife to a man who had as many ancestors as debts, and who let her remain on the stage because he needed all the money she could earn. They had gone to America shortly after their marriage; and newspapers reached me constantly, giving accounts of the successes she was achieving—of the *furore* she was exciting. Her letters, however, were few and far between.

According to her own account, she had scanty leisure for much correspondence; but “though I write not often, I think of you ever.” That was what she said, but I did not attach much importance to the statement. She had

gone out of my life, and why should she remember me? I had stood still, and she had gone on.

Fêted, flattered, a celebrity, she seemed to my imagination as different from the Adelaide Lemberg who had walked with me on that Sunday so long ago, as noonday is from dawn.

She was not to blame for my folly; yet with her marriage all the sweetness, the poetry, the beauty of life seemed to have departed. It signified nothing now that the notes of the piano selected with a view of her approval should be profaned by the touch of other fingers.

Bessie was as welcome to torture its keys as anybody else. The drawing-room set apart for Adelaide's occupation was no more to me than any other room; perhaps, on the whole, it was a relief to see the ruin which had been wrought in my heart made visible on the common objects of life. Every line of the poem which had rendered common things so lovely was turned into bitterness; and it signified little that the prose which succeeded was vulgar and unromantic as prose could be. Through the dreary winter time I think my heart must have been numb and cold, for I felt little save a dull sense of loss; but with the rising of the sap I awoke to a keener grief—to a miserable sorrow of loneliness—to an aching want of some hope and object in life—of something to look forward to—something to expect, to do, to strive for, to compass.

Idleness had been sweet and pleasant when I first took up my residence at Reedbourne, but time now seemed to hang heavily on hand.

I began to run up to town more frequently; I went to exhibitions; I sometimes actually walked through the Park; and one day I found myself in the Zoological Gardens.

I was delighted to find that Mr. Granton had a little place near Thamesford where he occasionally stopped for a week or so at a time. Quite by accident I met him strolling along the banks of the Reed, rod in hand, and basket slung behind him.

"I wonder you do not turn fisherman, Cheverley," he said one day, as we sauntered idly along, side by side.

"Fishing would be just the very occupation for you. When I *am harassed* and out of sorts, sitting beside a quiet stream *and watching my float* exercises much the same influence

upon me, I fancy, as David's harp must have done over Saul. You ought to get some tackle and begin."

But I shook my head, and answered "that I was too old a dog to learn new tricks," for which reason I did not buy line and hooks and take to angling.

All through that bright spring weather I was very badly off for employment indeed; and but for Mr. Granton's frequent visits to Thamesford, I scarcely—looking back—know what I should have done with the hours which moved so slowly.

He, however, was very kind. He used to call at The Snuggery and entice me out for long pleasant walks. At intervals of only a few days he would, when in the neighbourhood, bring me over a book, or come into my study with a smile to show me some interesting article he thought would prove of interest.

Being unused to society, I felt constrained to decline all the invitations he kindly gave; but though I could not make up my mind to go to his house for luncheon or dinner, that never prevented his coming to mine and eating a crust of bread and cheese, washed down by a glass of ale, or drinking a cup of tea when he sat to rest in my quiet room, after a long day's rambling beside the banks of Surrey's many streams.

The heart of no man given to unprofitable studies, to vague musings, to speculations concerning the wonders of creation, and the difficulties to be encountered in trying to reconcile the old vexed question of God's goodness, and the troubles of this troublesome world, need have desired a better male companion than Mr. Granton.

He was not vivacious or amusing, or even particularly clever, but he had read and thought much; he had come in contact with men of different countries and various creeds, he had seen "foreign parts," as the dear phrase of old has it, and his talk was just dashed with that touch of pensive melancholy which is so peculiarly grateful to the listener whose mind happens to be at the moment a trifle out of tune with the world in general.

Happily I was able to keep him all to myself. By some especial piece of good fortune I happened to tell Bessie, when she first asked me about him, that he had been one of the directors of the "Home and Foreign," and

that he was in the neighbourhood for the sake of the fishing.

Hearing this and no more, imagining he was a mere lodger at some village inn, and seeing that he was not young, or likely, or, as she expressed herself, "one of her sort," she took no more interest in the subject, and I judiciously refrained from enlarging upon it.

Had she known he owned a most lovely little house, set about with gardens and shrubberies and lawns sloping to the river; a house furnished, as I saw the only time I entered it in those days, in the most exquisite fashion, and filled with art treasures; the house of a man possessed of most cultivated tastes and ample means of gratifying them, Bessie would have given me no peace till she was made free of that paradise.

As matters were, she rarely came into the room upon the occasion of any of Mr. Granton's visits.

"He looks even older than you, uncle," she exclaimed with a charming frankness; "and I can't understand what you talk about. It always seems so dry;" for which reasons, and probably for others best known to herself, Bessie left me to enjoy the society of this congenial friend in peace.

After Miss Dodman had been with us for some time, Bessie caught cold; and as she consequently declined to give us the pleasure of her society downstairs, and would not hear of our visitor "imprisoning herself in a sick-room," that young lady and I were naturally thrown much together.

It was then Miss Dodman began to show me those little attentions which, no doubt, caused her to be "always wanted," as she told me she was, in her own home.

In those days Miss Dodman asked if she might be allowed to pour out my morning coffee for me; and over the breakfast-table I learned, by degrees, more of the Dodman family than I ever desired to know.

"Papa does work so hard," his daughter told me. "If he had more capital, of course he could spare himself a little; but, as he says, almost all his capital is invested in children."

"Papa sometimes says he wishes I had been a boy. I *could have been* of great help to him by this time. But

just fancy, the four eldest of us are girls ! It is too dreadful, is it not ? ” And so on, and so on, till really occasionally I caught myself wishing that the Dodman family had never existed.

All this was very ungrateful on my part, as Miss Dodman, left to her own devices, busied herself about fifty little things Bessie never dreamed of attending to.

That I never grew to like Miss Dodman's society—that I never found it in the slightest degree soothing or congenial, or interesting, it is, perhaps, unnecessary for me to say ; but in comparison with Bessie she seemed absolutely intellectual ; whilst, without any comparison at all, her cheerfulness and her bright good humour were delighted to see. True, Mrs. Brooker said to Peter, the gardener and odd man, while he was one day shaking some pieces of carpet, “ Eh ! that Miss Dodman is a sly one—a deep artful young snake,” but the remark did not effect my estimate of Bessie's friend. Naturally Mrs. Brooker did not like my visitors ; and she was too careful for me to overhear her opinion of the last of them to leave much doubt on my mind as to her object.

What troubled me far more than the housekeeper's disapproval was in the way in which Bessie refused to be convalescent. The doctor said there was not much the matter with her, and that she would be better downstairs than keeping her own apartment ; but a full fortnight elapsed before we could induce her to show herself in the drawing-room, and for ten days more I was forced to make myself so far agreeable to Miss Dodman as to take her out for long walks, in which she declared she especially delighted ; or for little excursions upon the water, when she told me she had “ never been so happy before in all her life.”

During the whole of this time Mr. Granton happened to be absent ; never permanently resident at Thamesford, he came and went as the fancy seized him, or as the necessities of business and the calls of pleasure prompted. He had gone to Paris for a week, and remained away so long that I had almost forgotten to expect his return, when one morning, as I and Miss Dodman were waiting to cross the ferry to Thamesford, Mr. Granton himself stepped out of the boat.

"I have only been back a few days," he said after the first interchange of greetings; "and I was going to look you up this afternoon, on my way back from Reedbourne, where I have some business to transact; but as I see you are bound for the other side of the river, I will call some other time."

"We are only going across the ferry in order to walk back over the bridge, a mile further on," I answered. "We shall be home in less than an hour, and I do hope you will turn in to The Snuggery."

"Then I will," he answered, with his own pleasant smile; and we parted.

When he called we were about to sit down to our early dinner, at which meal I asked him to join us.

Bessie, still giving herself the airs of an invalid, coquetted with cold lamb, and toyed with gooseberry tart, and answered such remarks as Mr. Granton addressed to her with the air of one who should say,

"Cannot you let me alone? Is it possible you fail to see how ill I have been?"

For this reason possibly our guest turned his attention to Miss Dodman, who brought a good healthy appetite to bear upon the simple viands, and said, quite openly, that she was "very hungry indeed."

Mr. Granton devoted a good deal of attention to her; asked her how she liked Surrey, whether she had ever been at Reedbourne before, talked to her about the various points of interest in the neighbourhood, and made himself—so Bessie subsequently declared, with that little toss of her head, the meaning of which I had learned so well—"quite agreeable."

That he should have done so surprised me, I confess, a little; but what surprised me still more was the curious expression with which, from the window of my study, he afterwards watched Miss Dodman and Bessie strolling about the garden with arms encircling each the other's waist.

"Seems a bright, clever sort of a girl," he commented.

"Did you say she was a relative?"

I explained. I told how it chanced that Bessie had *come to Reedbourne*, and why Miss Dodman was invited *to solace her loneliness*. I added I did not consider the

young lady clever, but that she was most adaptable and good-natured.

"I fancy she is clever in her own way," he remarked. "And this illness of your niece—has she been ailing long?"

For answer, I said that I did not think there had ever been much the matter with Bessie, and that I was quite sure there was nothing the matter with her now.

"You have not thought about sending her from home, I suppose—to the seaside, for instance?"

"I have not," I replied; "but I will do so if the doctor considers a change necessary. I am afraid you fancy she looks delicate."

"Frankly," he returned, "I don't think she looks nearly so ill as you. What is the matter?"

I did not answer him for a moment, but then I said,

"I have met with a trouble. I am trying to live it down."

"But not succeeding very admirably, I fear, in the endeavour."

"You are right; I am not succeeding."

You stand more in need of a change, I fancy, than your niece."

"Perhaps so; I had not thought of a change being advisable for either."

He did not pursue the subject; neither did he greatly prolong his visit. Before leaving, however, he reverted to Miss Dodman.

"Did I understand you to say that her father is in business as a commission agent?"

"Yes," I replied, wondering at the interest he evinced in the Dodman connection; "his office is in Lawrence Lane, I think."

"Pushing sort of man—assured manner—'hail fellow well met'—'I'm the equal of anybody' kind of person?"

"I have never seen him," I explained.

"He lives somewhere to the south of London, and has a delicate wife and a tribe of children—most of them girls."

"Maggie's father lives at Camberwell, and she has three brothers and five sisters, I believe. Do you know anything of Mr. Dodman—you seem interested in the family?"

"I know something of Mr. Dodman, and I am rather interested in the family," he answered with a smile, the meaning of which I could not then understand.

A week went by, and though Bessie confessed to feeling better, she still threw Miss Dodman upon me for such amusement as my company might afford. Twice, therefore, when we were out together, we met Mr. Granton, and each time he talked more to that young lady than I could exactly comprehend.

One morning early I stole away by myself without asking for her society, or running the risk of having it forced, by politeness, upon me.

The first post had brought me a letter written upon foreign paper, and in a difficult hand, which I desired to re-read and ponder over in solitude, for it came from Adelaide's mother, and was full of, to me, disquieting matter.

"She had," the writer said, "no other friend of her beloved child's to whom she could speak freely without hesitancy but to me. Her heart was in suspense—her mind had a terror. Did I know, could I tell her, good of the Baron to whom her daughter confided herself? The letters, so few, so seldom, of Adelaide cherished, informed her nothing of the dear one's happiness; and she was told—ah! yes, and this it was which filled her with apprehensions frightful—that the Baron was not an honourable sir, as became his rank, but a gambler, a spendthrift, a one notorious.

"Before her marriage Adelaide wearied never of sending home gifts; but now there came not any, not no more." She begged me to understand that "of them she had in 'these days' no need; she was well off; but she knew too much the mind of her daughter to doubt of her boundless generosity if the stories whispered were untrue. She panted to know what I could tell her—I, the dear friend, cherished of Adelaide, when she was so poor, so lonely, so unfriended, would I pardon, and would I write? Would I retain her confidence given, in the sacredness of my own bosom? Would I forgive the anxiety of Adelaide's mother, and, for one so dear to both, think no wonder that she made opportunity for to send this letter? If I could but tell her Adelaide was happy, it would be that she should

make herself also happy—content, even though she saw her child no more.”

It was the loveliest morning imaginable. On the banks of the Reed all the wild flowers that blossom in July seemed to be growing and blowing—tansy, meadow-sweet (called, for some reason, by the poorer classes in that neighbourhood, deadman’s blossom), apple-pie, burdock, sorrel, cow-parsley, nettles, forget-me-not, the impudent-looking little monkey plant, ragged robin, together with reeds, rushes, and long rank grass, were all opening out their various colours and growing in a wild tangle of glorious profusion beside the quiet stream, upon the surface of which king’s cobs bloomed and water-lilies floated. To the left of the path was a ravine, the sides covered with thorn bushes, whence the flowers had long departed, and where green haws were already forming. At the bottom rippled a tiny stream; and amongst the blackberries and the wild rose bushes, on which the hips would soon be red, woodruff, was giving out its fresh sweet scent, and briony convolvus and nightshade were clinging to and climbing around stem and branch and leaf.

A right royal show, one a king might have viewed with pleasure; and as I walked along, miserable about her, wondering how it was really faring with the woman who had grown into my very life, the thought so long ago put aside as vain, recurred to me—“What would *she* think of this? Would not all this beauty appeal to *her* as it does to me?”

On I went. I can see the landscape changing and changing as I write. Now within sound of aspens rustling, though no breath of wind shook the leaves of any other tree. Now across a murmuring weir, adown which the waters glided softly; now looking to where, in a once well-kept park, two great cedars looked darkly and grandly at the farmer’s cattle grazing upon the turf set apart in former times for deer; then, beside a mill the clock of which had stopped years before at exactly half-past two; then over a foot-bridge, raised so high in the middle that I could see for miles over the fair country steeped in sunshine; then down into green meadows, and along a path close to the widening river; then a pause, to look at a distant homestead where, beside the red-tiled barns, the well-dried hay was being carried and stacked.

Ay, even to the horses coming across the stream so

broad and shallow, where on the one side the pollards, newly topped, stand out brown and bare against the sky, and, on the other, gaily painted boats are drawn up on the shingle—it all comes back to me more vividly than in a photograph. I can see the loose harness reflected in the water, the figures of the carters as they sit sideways on the horses, their legs dangling while they jog with each movement of the animals; there is a willow down by the lock-house further on, bending tenderly towards the river; I can hear the rough “whoop!” and the gruff “come up!” of the men addressing their clumsy steeds; the soft regular plash of oars plied by some one who understands his work. Clear and distinct from the distant ferry rises the cry of “O—ver,” and then I know the Thames is close at hand, and that the stream dividing those green fields beyond is but the backwater from the weir beyond the lock.

I shall go a little further still to a quiet spot I wot of; and there, whence I can see the gray tower of that old church on the opposite bank, and a bosky ait where the swans live when they are at home, I will re-read the letter written by Adelaide’s mother, and try to satisfy myself that there must be some mistake; that the loving tender maiden, who was so sweet and gentle, and confiding, cannot have spoiled her life by marrying a man incapable of appreciating the beauty and nobility of her unselfish nature.

CHAPTER IX.

AN INCREDIBLE SUGGESTION.

THE hours passed by, and it was nigh noon. Midway in the river, in that bosky ait where the young cygnets were reared, there might be coolness and shadow, but on land certainly nowhere else in the Valley of the Thames. One of the mysteries I have yet to solve is the reason why in that favoured region there is no shelter, and there is no shade. The rain beats, the wind howls, the heat of the sun pours down; and though there are trees and hedges, there never seems tree or hedge that can save from drenching or

sunstroke, or prevent a wanton breeze snatching off your hat and making merry over the misfortune.

To come back to what I was saying. There was no shade, and, spite of all my misery, at length feeling the heat more than I could endure, I arose to seek a different place of rest, when I confronted Mr. Granton.

"I am so happy to meet you at last alone," he said.

Still with that feeling upon me of desiring quiet and shade, I put out my hand and answered "that I was glad to see him."

"You are troubled about something," he went on kindly.

"Yes," I answered; "it is the old trouble—only now it has taken a different form."

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"You forget," I answered, "that I was left a legacy, and that I am, comparatively speaking, rich. If money could help me I should need no help, having it."

He smiled—a kind compassionate smile—while he replied, "Money is new to you, but, believe me, after all, money is very little."

I knew it. Much as money should have done for me, it had brought me very little. At that moment I could have written sermons about its utter worthlessness.

"You have not been looking well for some time past," he said, understanding, perhaps, that reference to my grief was like the fretting of a wound. "Why do you not try a change of scene and air? Solitude is all very well, but like most other good things, it is possible to have too much of it.

"I wish I had," I groaned, thinking of my niece's even flow of inane babble, of the exasperating mediocrity of Miss Dodman's eternally smiling, round, red-and-white, milkmaid type of face.

Mr. Granton looked at me curiously, then remarked,

"By the bye, that reminds me I was going to ask if Miss Dodman's visit is to last much longer?"

"I do not know, I am sure," I answered, wondering at the interest he seemed to take in that very commonplace young lady. "She is *always* saying she has stopped an unreasonable time, and then when I beg her to remain, she replies that *she* will be only too glad if her papa raises no

objection, but *he* is so particular, and so much afraid of any of them out-staying their welcome."

"Practically, however, he never does raise any objection?" said Mr. Granton.

"It would seem not, for she stays."

"And you are glad, I conclude, that she does stay?"

"I ought to be. It is a relief to know my niece has a companion whom she seems to like."

"I wonder," began Mr. Granton after a slight pause, "whether you will be offended by my advising you to take Miss Dodman at her word the next time she suggests returning to her family?"

"I certainly am not offended," I answered, "but I confess I feel a little surprised."

"And you wish, naturally, to know my reasons for tendering such counsel. They are extremely simple. You ought to let Miss Dodman go as soon as possible, unless you wish her to remain altogether."

"I do not want her to remain permanently; at one time I did think of proposing that she should stay as a companion to Bessie—a salaried companion, you understand—but I rejected the idea, though I think both the girls would have liked such an arrangement."

"I am pretty sure that is not exactly the arrangement they desire," he said. "The thing they do want is that Miss Dodman should remain here as your wife."

"What!" I exclaimed.

In the extremity of my astonishment I stood quite still and stared at Mr. Granton, who broke into the first fit of genuine merriment in which I had ever known him indulge. Looking upon me, he laughed long and uncontrollably—laughed till the tears came into his eyes—laughed after he had wiped them away.

"I beg a thousand pardons," he said, "but it was irresistible."

And, indeed, I must have seemed a ludicrous candidate for matrimonial honours, standing there with mouth and eyes wide open, limp with amazement, dumb with intensity of astonishment—an old-fashioned elderly man, clad in *black garments* that had pertained to the days of my *struggling clerkship*—destitute of any grace of manner or *beauty of person* likely to find favour in a woman's eyes.

"The notion never occurred to you, I see," remarked Mr. Granton, with difficulty composing his features into an expression of befitting gravity.

"Good Heavens, no!" I answered. "It is impossible it ever occurred to her—utterly, totally impossible."

"Believe me, it is not only possible, but certain. If I were in the habit of making bets, I would stake a large sum that Miss Dodman has been playing her cards to win Mr. Cheverley."

"This is dreadful," I exclaimed. "It is such a frightful idea that I cannot realise it."

"Afraid to realise the fact of your happiness!" said Mr. Granton, laughing again. "Come, confess you have all along cherished a secret, and, as you imagined, unrequited attachment for the young lady."

I laid my hand on his arm.

"Do not jest about the matter," I entreated, "but tell me what induces you to believe the girl ever thought of anything so monstrous, so inconceivable?"

"I can't say," he replied; "the first time I saw her the notion flashed through my mind. I thought about her afterwards; in fact, I could not help thinking about her; then I began to suspect that she and your niece were in league—that Miss Bessie's illness was half assumed in order to throw you and Miss Dodman together. If it were not for the father, the matter might never become serious; but Dodman has been stretching his hands out after 'capital' ever since I knew anything of him, and, unless you are very careful, he will try to screw money out of you by threatening 'a breach of promise.'"

"What ought I to do?"

"I should try to get the girl out of the house. When next she proposes going, do not ask her to stop. You might find it necessary to leave home for a short time. Whatever you do, try to accomplish your object quietly and naturally. Think the matter over for twenty-four hours; then make up your mind to adopt some course, and stick to it."

Like one in a dream, I walked slowly homeward. If I had been going to execution I could not have felt more reluctant to enter The Snuggery. I own I did not—I could not—believe Mr. Granton to be other than mistaken in his

opinion ; but still there was a horrible possibility about the whole thing which fascinated, even while it revolted me.

How, having heard what I had heard—how, with such an idea forced upon my consideration—could I meet those two girls ; listen to Bessie's prattle, and thank Miss Dodman for those little attentions which Mr. Granton implied were but so much love-making ?

Love-making ! Pah ! The very phrase made me feel sick. Already I seemed to loathe the memory of Miss Dodman's round face, and red cheeks, and blue eyes, and brown hair. I could not meet her—not then, at all events.

It was so intolerably hot, and the roads were so destitute of shadow, that I must get under shelter somewhere, but I would not go into the house. At the bottom of the garden there stood an old arbour, a rough affair, but dark and cool ; there I resolved to consider out the affair. It was easy to slip unperceived through the gate leading from the paddock to the moss-covered walks ; and as I knew the arbour was not a place affected by my niece and her guest, I felt certain I should be able to rest there in peace, and gather together my scattered senses without the fear of being exposed to intrusion.

Putting aside the tangle of hops which shaded the entrance, I entered the summer-house and sat down. I was tired, I was warm. I had tasted nothing all day save a cup of milk swallowed before setting out on my hurried ramble. Mrs. Lemberg's letter, and Mr. Granton's caution, had both, in their way, disquieted me. Excitement of any kind was new and agitating. I could not remember when I had felt so weary. With a feeling of relief upon me, I stretched out my limbs, leaned my head back against the rough unbarked pine slabs which formed the walls of the cool retreat, looked for a few minutes with half-shut eyes at the tracery of leaves festooning the doorway, and then sank softly and gradually to sleep.

I must have been asleep over an hour, when I began slowly to awake, and, still, scarcely conscious whether I was dreaming or not, heard the sound of voices close beside me. Some persons were evidently talking just outside the summer house. The hedge which divided the kitchen-garden from the fields adjacent was, at that particular spot, well shaded by a fine old walnut-tree ; and on the green

bank, beneath its branches, I soon found Miss Dodman and my niece had ensconced themselves, and were chattering away like a dozen sparrows.

"And you are quite certain, dear, we shall live in London?" It was my niece who uttered these words.

"Of course—do you suppose I would live here?" answered Miss Dodman.

"Won't it be delightful?" exclaimed Bessie, ecstatically. "After being buried alive in this stupid place, I shall not know what to do for joy. Tell me all about it over again, Maggie—about what we shall do when you have the management of everything. You have not changed your mind about the carriage?"

"No," said Miss Dodman, decidedly, "we must have a carriage. It would never do to go about in hired things."

"And we shall drive in the Park," continued Bessie, with a silly chuckle.

"And have a box at the Opera, and never be a single evening at home, except when we ourselves 'receive,'" capped Maggie.

"There is only one thing, Maggie, which troubles me," said Bessie, hesitating.

"What is that?" asked Miss Dodman, a little sharply.

"Well, you know dear—now, Maggie, you must not be angry—that at the beginning he had only ten thousand pounds, and he must have spent some of that; and ten thousand pounds at five per cent *can't* make more than five hundred a year—ten pounds a week; and I don't see, darling, how we are to keep carriages and go to the Opera, and have everything we want for thirty shillings a day; and it won't be *quite* thirty shillings either."

"You little stupid, he must go and make money. He will have to be taken away from those ridiculous books, and taught how to make ten thousand a year. I think we might manage on that what do you say, Bessie?"

"Ten thousand a year!" repeated the young lady. "It takes away my breath!"

"It does not take away mine," retorted Miss Dodman.

"But how in the world is uncle to make ten thousand a year? I don't believe he had much more than a hundred at the insurance office."

"Pooh!" said the other. "That was quite a different

affair. With capital pa declares anybody can do anything. He calls it the Archimedean screw."

"When do you think it will be, dear?" asked my niece a little irrelevantly.

"When do I think what will be? O, you mean the marriage! Well, he has still got to ask me, you know."

"I should fancy he would do that very soon."

"I'm sure I do not know—he is very slow about it. I never did meet with anybody so slow before; but I daresay it is only his old-fashioned way. I feel satisfied he is very fond of me."

"There can't be any doubt about that," said Bessie, briskly. "Did you notice how carefully he put the rose you gave him yesterday in water?"

"Yes; and when I expressed a wish to see the *Queen* for the last week, how soon he went to the station and ordered it down!"

"And how he jumped at the notion of taking us both to Windsor, Maggie darling!"

"He is very kind in his way," remarked "Maggie darling," pensively. "I shall be able to do what I like with him."

"I am certain you will, dear. I wonder where he has gone?"

"London, most likely. Mrs. Brooker said he seemed in a hurry, as if he wanted to catch a train."

"Perhaps he has gone to speak to your papa."

"He will speak to me first, I fancy," answered Miss Dodman, with a little triumphant laugh. "Have we not sat here long enough, Bessie? It is getting a little cooler now; let us go down to the river. There are sure to be plenty of people on it such a day as this."

They were gone. Fainter and fainter grew the sound of their voices, as they wandered across the paddock, and so off to the Thames by the path I had come.

Though not an eavesdropper by habit or nature, it never occurred to me either to move away while they were speaking, or to make my presence known.

Candidly, I confess I felt no compunction about the matter. If a plot for murdering me had been in process of hatching under the walnut-tree, I should have listened to its details with much the same feeling as I listened

to these two girls arranging the future of my life according to their ideas of what that future ought to be.

Why, O why, had I been so blind—so foolish? How could I have remained so ignorant as not to realise that if a man be only rich and a bachelor, some woman will be found tenderly anxious to share the burden of his wealth with him?

Thought I had gone to London, did they? Well, they should not find themselves mistaken on that point. I looked at my watch; there would be a train for Waterloo in less than an hour.

Away from Reedbourne, I could arrange some plan of action—decide on the best course to pursue.

"Shall you be back to-night, sir?" asked Mrs. Brooker, as I stood folding up my umbrella into that careful symmetry of form I delighted to behold.

"I do not think I shall be back for a few days," I answered; and so departed.

Arrived in town, I went straight to my former lodgings, where the landlady received me with effusion.

How strange it seemed! The old surroundings—the old sounds—the old atmosphere—nothing changed, save that my former landlady's cap looked dirtier and her dress dingier than of yore, and that, where my book-shelves had stood, there hung two engravings, one Ruth, the other John the Baptist. Nothing much changed save myself. There was the narrow strip of garden-ground on which she and I had looked out upon that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning when we partook of breakfast together. There was the remembered mirror over the mantel-piece, in which I had seen her dear face reflected. There was the easy chair in which I had sat alone for so many, many solitary evenings. It all came back, as the waves brought the dead past for a moment to the shores of the present: the monotony, the drudgery, the round of dreary work, the years in which I had grown accustomed to my labour as perhaps the brutes grow accustomed to theirs. But a few hours previously I could have preached homilies about the vanity of riches; now, being brought once again face to face with the realities of the time when I was poor, I felt as if I must *fall on my knees and thank God for having delivered me from penury, brought me out of that land of*

stultifying bondage, into a fair country full of leisure, and freedom, and beauty.

In that moment it came to me that I had failed to employ my wealth as I ought to have done. I had been delivered from one narrow life, and at once and voluntarily taken up another differing in its nature, but hardly in its degree; still a snail in its accustomed shell, I had but moved my position. From necessity, for years I led a life of the merest routine; and when I could have left it, I found myself leading a routine existence still.

Well, it is never too late to mend, never, and it was not too late for me. Walking that evening through the familiar streets, I decided upon my plans; I settled what I would do with a little of my future.

I would travel; I would see something of the world, something of my fellow-creatures. I would try to shake off part of the shyness which had ever paralysed so many of my best efforts; and if I could not be brilliant or clever or remarkable in any way—all of which, indeed, I knew to be impossible—I would endeavour to be human, and know something more of my kind than I had yet done; and see whether there was no string in my own nature which might produce a melody when touched even by unaccustomed fingers.

Yes, I would cast aside my shell, and go out into the world instead of shrinking from all contact with it.

Before doing anything, however, it would, I felt, be necessary to dispose of Bessie.

Ever since we lived in the same house, we had been like two dogs coupled unwillingly together, and each pulling a contrary way.

What I liked she disliked—the things I disliked she liked. It might, indeed, be no blame to her, but it was torture to me, that in all respects we were so dissimilar.

Never was it possible we could become congenial. Better, far better, therefore, that she should go her way and I mine, than try to maintain the relations which had failed so signally. But then arose the question, Where could she go? in what direction would it be right to permit her to wander? In any well-regulated home she must prove not *only miserable herself*, but the cause of misery to others. *To send her amongst intellectual people would be a vain*

attempt to alter that which was unalterable. The more I considered the question the more it perplexed me, the more hopeless seemed any possible solution to such an enigma. At length I decided upon asking Mr. Granton's advice.

By return of post came his answer :

"Delighted to hear you have resolved to travel. A year passed abroad will prove a year well spent. Concerning the young lady, I should, if in your place, ask Mrs. Dodman whether she knows of any family who would receive her for the sum you mention. Should the arrangement seem desirable to her, Mrs. Dodman could propose for your niece to live with them. I know the objection you will at once raise to such a plan, but the advantages connected with it are these : Miss Richards likes, or professes to like, the family, If you send her to reside elsewhere, she will at once begin to pine for those she regards as friends ; whereas, should she disagree with them, as after a time I imagine she will be almost sure to do, you can then propose some other course more, perhaps, in accordance with your own views. Further, in the future she may be more amenable than I suspect you will find her at present, while the arrangement will conciliate the Dodmans—a not unimportant point to be considered."

It was not the advice I had expected, neither was it quite the advice I liked, but I had asked Mr. Granton's opinion, and determined to be guided by what he said ; and, because his words sounded over-worldly, I did not mean to shut my ears to the common sense they contained.

There were many things I should have preferred to seeking an interview with Mrs. Dodman, but evidently the thing must be gone through ; and before midday I started for Camberwell.

When I arrived at the house I sought—that of the gentleman who was always looking out for capital—I found the hall-door ajar, kept open, in fact, by the foot of a very irate individual who was addressing some exceedingly unpleasant remarks to a slatternly servant, evidently anxious to get rid of him. I have lived too long in lodgings where the landladies were sometimes impecunious, and always a little behind with their tradespeople, not to recognise in the angry creditor a purveyor of milk.

Why that harmless fluid should exercise the influence it

does upon those who deal in it has always amazed me. There is nothing mild, I warrant, about the man whose daily dues in the way of halfpence and pence are suffered to fall into arrear.

"It ain't no use to speak to me," said Mr. Dodman's servant, at length goaded into indignant retort; 'I don't owe you nothing. Keep your langwidge for them as does."

"That is just what I mean to do," was the answer. "I want them to hear me. I wish to tell them I can't and I won't put up with their promises any longer. I will stand here till I see somebody. I will take out a county court summons—"

"Suppose in the meantime you allow me to pass," I suggested. "Is Mrs. Dodman at home?" I went on, speaking to the woman, who now—as the man stepped back a pace or two—opened the door for me to enter.

"After you, sir," suggested the dairyman, who, equal to the change of position, followed close upon my heels into the house. "I'll just wait till I can see your mistress," he added, and took up a position in the hall.

It was a poor house—a poor dingy house with thin walls, and imperfectly fastening doors; and I could not avoid hearing the dialogue which ensued between Mrs. Dodman and the importunate creditor, while I waited for her in the parlour.

After a little delay Mrs. Dodman entered, looking flushed and weary; after all, such scenes do take a considerable amount out of even the most hardened of debtors.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," she said, and sat down, a mass of good-natured untidiness in a room strewn with work of every description; a room so disorderly that I at once felt Bessie's heart would have rejoiced at sight of it.

In five minutes I had explained the nature of my errand; in one, Mrs. Dodman jumped at the suggestion.

"We always were very glad to have your niece with us, Mr. Cheverley," she said; "and I think she used to be happy here. So you need not be looking any further afield for a safe place to bestow her while you are out of England, and—well, I do not like the idea of taking any *money for her*, especially after your kindness to Maggie; *but we are not rich—we are not indeed*," she repeated, as

though fearful I should imagine they were millionaires ;
“and if it will really be more satisfactory to you—”

It was so much more satisfactory to me that when, a little later on, I walked out of the house—having left behind me a cheque for Bessie’s first quarter in the “Maison Dodman”—I regarded the dairyman, whom I again encountered, quite in the light of an old acquaintance, and addressed him in a friendly manner.

It grieves me to say that he did not reciprocate my civility, but made me an answer which, though spoken under his breath, was perfectly audible, and coupled me and the Dodmans together in a manner that at any other time must have proved hurtful to my vanity.

CHAPTER X.

TO BE LET.

HAVING thus rid myself of my encumbrances, it was astonishing how naturally and eagerly my thoughts turned to foreign travel.

It seems to me a law of Nature, and a merciful one, that those who are tied hand and foot by the necessities of their position should become such creatures of habit as to feel the prospect of change distasteful ; whilst others of their fellows who are able to indulge their caprices find that appetite grows with what it feeds on. After all, it is but the eternal *ego*, which is as strong in the breast of the man who has only the beauties of his suburban place of dwelling to contemplate, as in him who may be here to-day and *en route* for St. Petersburg to-morrow.

And thus, when I had realised to myself that it was actually possible for Reedbourne to continue its course without the presence of Reuben Cheverley, as London, which had been my habitation for a very much longer period, seemed able to do, I began, I believe, to disparage my dwelling and the village near which it was situated. Often I caught myself considering what a good thing it was I should be far distant before the floods were out again and the snow lying on the roads, before the dark nights came,

with lamp lighted at four o'clock, and the long hours stretching away in dim gloominess until bed-time.

Foreign lands were about to be honoured with my presence, and I therefore commenced to regard those lands with favour. I approached works of travel in quite another spirit from any which had ever previously possessed me; and I caught myself repeating sentences in strange languages, and holding imaginary conversations in unwonted tongues, about what had hitherto seemed the most ordinary affairs of life.

Already I was beginning mentally to say, "Those cabbages need not be planted; I shall not be here." "There can be no necessity to talk about carthing up that celery; I shall not now require it;" and indeed, had it not been that the man who saw after such details remarked, "Whoever comes, master, while you are away, will be glad of a dish of greens;" and "We had best plant out them broccoli; most gentlefolks are main fond of it as a change from roots"—I fear the next occupant would have come badly off for winter vegetables.

The charm of the place I had thought to make a home was gone. Poor fool! As children set out flowers in their little gardens, and caper for joy to see the goodly show, unconscious that in a few hours all the beauty the *parterre* contains will be past and gone, so I had planted without root, and behold, where I hoped to gather was barrenness; where I had thought to cull bright roses, I reaped but thorns of disappointment.

I had dreamed my dream, and it was over. Let who would see visions, I should behold mine no more. The subjective life which had sufficed for me once could in the future prove nothing but a mistake. I would leave Reedbourne, and, crossing the Channel, strive in strange lands and among strange people to begin—now I was no longer even middle-aged—a new existence, broader, wider, more cosmopolitan than any I had ever previously conceived of, as being possible for myself.

The man, however, who has for thirty-five years been careful about pennies is scarcely likely ever to become careless with reference to pounds; and, anxious as I felt to commence my travels, I had no intention of doing so till a tenant was found for The Snuggery. Disenchanted

as I was with my purchase, I understood too well the advantages of having a spot of earth one can call "home," to part lightly with the little freehold, otherwise I should have sold the house and land, and disposed of the furniture by auction.

As matters stood, I adhered to the design I had conceived of letting the place "Furnished;" and though those who "came to view" inflicted upon me humiliations innumerable, that design was at length achieved.

If ever a man wants to know the opinion of society concerning his residence, he has only to try and let it, and not an imperfection but will be candidly pointed out.

At last I was at one with Mrs. Turtle; at last I understood what she must have suffered at the hands of her sister-women.

There is no law powerful enough to compel anyone to take a house he does not like, except, indeed, necessity; and why, therefore, the ladies who came to look over The Snuggery should have treated me with a lofty disdain, and the house with contempt, I am quite unable to explain.

Mindful of my own house-hunting experiences, I endeavoured so to word the advertisement as to convey a fairly accurate idea of the cottage and its appointments; but had the description been that of a palatial residence, the persons who came to look at it could not have expressed more bitter disappointment, or louder indignation with the reality.

At the time I marvelled what these people, who all came from the regulation six or eight roomed houses in the suburbs, really wanted; but I know now.

Their *beau idéal* of a residence was a London villa, with abundance of steps, stucco, varnish, and pretension. In the days when a stroll in the summer evenings, and a walk out to the more distant suburbs, were among the few pleasures of a routine life, I used to marvel at the "genteel residences" I beheld run up by builders, and pity the human beings compelled to inhabit them.

That is an old story now; and the surprise is past as well as the pity. Supply, as a rule, means demand; and there can be no question but the present producers of eligible residences *understand perfectly* the tastes of those for whom they have to cater.

In my ignorance I had imagined The Snuggery to be a place any gentleman of limited means might have been glad to rent ; but the ladies taught me my error. Though why they should have considered it necessary to insult me into the bargain, and, keeping only one poor little maid-of-all-work, flourish about housemaids' and butlers' pantries and china closets and back staircases, is difficult to understand.

I might have completely lost heart as to the chances of ever letting my country residence had I not happened to get into correspondence concerning it with a gentleman who seemed to have the rare merit of himself understanding what he wanted. His letters were clear and to the purpose ; and though he did ask an infinite number of questions, he sent them in list order, so that I experienced no more difficulty in answering them, than I should in filling up an insurance form.

"I want an inexpensive place in the country," at length he wrote. "From the description you give I imagine your house may prove suitable ; and if you are likely to be at leisure next Friday afternoon, I will run down to Reedbourne by the train which leaves Waterloo a little after two, Should Friday be inconvenient, I will try to get away on Monday."

To which I replied that Friday would suit me very well indeed, and that I should hope to see him by the train named.

In expectation of his visit the walks were rolled and the grass mown, the house swept and garnished, the straggling branches of the rose-trees nailed up, the flower-beds raked and weeded, the kitchen-garden relieved of haulms and peasticks ; the windows set wide open to let in the breeze, and the blinds drawn close to keep out the sun ; the furniture arranged so as to display its beauties to the greatest advantage, and the kitchen hearth swept, and a huge iron kettle hung on to boil.

We were all in readiness : Matthew in the stable grooming the melancholy-looking horse ; Mrs. Brooker in a new cap ; myself trying to read Macaulay's "Essay on Robert Montgomery," when a loud rat-tat-tat of the knocker, followed by a sharp peal of the bell, announced visitors.

"Mr. Rodewald, sir," said Mrs. Brooker, in her best man-

ner, throwing open the study door, and ushering in two gentlemen, one of whom held out his hand, and saying, "Mr. Cheverley, I presume," declared his name to be Rodewald, and adding that he had taken the liberty of bringing a friend with him, begged to introduce "Mr. Smith."

"I think Mr. Smith and I have met before," I observed, recognising the individual before me, the gaunt and mirthless stranger of Coster Square.

"Eh! how's this, Smith? You did not tell me you were acquainted with Mr. Cheverley." And Mr. Rodewald turned upon his companion with quick suspicion.

"My acquaintance with Mr. Cheverley is of the slightest," answered Mr. Smith. "If I had known he was the owner of this place I could have told you we walked back from a lecture one night together."

"What a strange coincidence your meeting here!" remarked Mr. Rodewald.

"All coincidences are accounted strange. I am sure I don't know why," commented Mr. Smith.

"Will you rest for a little while, or should you first like to look round the house?" I asked, feeling it might be well to change the conversation.

"I should like to look round the house," answered Mr. Rodewald, briskly. "What do you say, Smith?"

"That, with Mr. Cheverley's permission, I will remain here. I am not going to take the place."

"What a strange fellow you are!"

"I am a tired fellow," said the other. "Mr. Cheverley, have I permission to remain among your books?"

"Certainly; but I fear you will not find much to your taste upon my shelves."

"Now, how can you possibly tell what my taste is?" he answered.

"Let us leave him to his own devices," suggested Mr. Rodewald; adding, as we crossed the hall, "He is in one of his contrary moods to-day. A singular fish, but clever—wonderfully clever."

To this statement I made no answer, for the simple reason that none which seemed suitable occurred to me; and without further discursive conversation I showed Mr. Rodewald the house and garden, and yard and meadows.

By this time habit had rendered me pretty familiar with

the lynx-eyedness of persons who came to view, but in the whole of my experience I never met with a man or woman so sharp-sighted, physically and mentally, as Mr. Rodewald. Before we had exhausted the premises I was reduced to a mere cipher. I felt myself in the presence of a master mind, of an individual capable of making the most out of the land; of causing a dozen blades of grass to grow where one had grown before; of obtaining unwonted crops out of the garden; of consuming those crops when fit for gathering; of inducing hens to lay all the year round; of having eatable bread baked at home; of fattening pigs in a very short space of time; of storing apples so that they should not decay; of getting twice the work out of man and beast I ever attempted; of managing a business in town, and yet keeping an eye upon the pettiest detail of household expenditure.

He had every element of success. Good health, a calm judgment, a cold heart, a calculating head. As he stood gazing up at the house I looked at him intently, and the picture then taken on the canvas of memory has never faded.

A man under, rather than over, the middle height, stiffly built, not gaunt like his companion, or flabbily fat like too many English people. A man who looked as if, on emergency, he could strike out straight from his shoulder, and prove as ready with his fists as he undoubtedly was with his tongue. In his youth possessed probably of a complexion clear red, clear white; but the suns and winds of many a year had browned the white and faded the red, and given a manly look to cheeks which might once have been effeminate. Light-brown hair, streaked here and there with gray—hair short, crisp, not curly; whiskers with a tinge of red running through the brown; a clean-shaved mouth and chin, an aquiline nose, blue eyes—keen, cold, quick, and intelligent; a broad forehead, a somewhat short neck, a head capacious enough to hold plenty of good or of evil—such were the items that went to make up Mr. Rodewald, standing a little in advance of me on the lawn, and looking up at the house.

"I think it will do," he said, at last; "but your terms won't. We can talk them over by and by;" and he led the way back, as if he were already in possession.

"Mr. Smith will wonder at our long absence," I remarked; for the inspection had, indeed, occupied a considerable time.

"O no, he won't!" answered Mr. Rodewald; "he has been deep in some book, you may be quite sure; you never met such a creature as he is for reading. He would rather spell over an old directory than not read at all."

"And you?" I asked.

"I can't read books. Each man has his forte, and printed matter is not mine. I can read looks, though," he went on, laughing. "You are marvelling now what a practical man like myself and an unpractical man like Smith, can have in common."

"Well, I confess, some such idea did cross my mind."

"I knew it," he said, triumphantly. "I knew exactly what you were thinking. At first sight it does seem unaccountable that we should be such friends; but if ever you see a very little woman, you may be sure that she has a tall husband; and it is on the principle, I suppose, of the sympathy of opposites that I am so fond of Smith. We have not a single idea in common. He is clever in everything I do not understand. In the wisdom of this world he is a perfect child. He never will be rich—he never can be rich. His opinions are not my opinions, neither are my ways his ways; but still we have been friends for years, and I tell you honestly I could 'better spare a better man.'"

For answer I only inclined my head. The fact was, Mr. Rodewald's flow of talk, and Mr. Rodewald's easy assumption that the friendship professed towards Mr. Smith could only be regarded as an act of weakness and condescension on his part, checked even my modest trickle of conversation.

It seemed so simple a matter to listen to his utterances, so difficult to originate any utterances of one's own. Even Mr. Smith, I noticed, who had certainly evinced no reticence of speech as we walked that night through the rain together, was possessed in Mr. Rodewald's presence with a dumb spirit.

As if to belie his friend's statement concerning his love of reading, when we re-entered the study we found Mr. Smith sitting gloomily beside the open window, his legs

stretched out, his hands in his pockets, his thoughts apparently miles away.

"I believe he has been asleep," exclaimed Mr. Rodewald, crossing the room and giving him a sounding thump on the back. "Come, wake up, wake up! We have been all round the place, seen the garden and the horse and cow, and cocks and hens."

"You need not tell me you have seen everything there was to see, for I knew that already," answered Mr. Smith, rising lazily, and stretching out a hand towards his hat. "Time for us to be getting back to the station, is it not?"

"You will take a glass of wine?" I suggested, hospitably; but both gentlemen declined my offer.

"Have a cup of tea, then?" I persisted; "it can be ready in five minutes."

Mr. Rodewald hesitated.

"We shall miss the train," remarked Mr. Smith.

"Let us miss it," said Mr. Rodewald, decidedly. "We have not the chance of drinking tea in the country every day, and since Mr. Cheverley is so kind—"

"I assure you the kindness is all on your side," I interrupted hastily.

"This is delightful," exclaimed Mr. Rodewald, rubbing his hands and walking to the open window.

"What do you think of the air, Smith? Is not it enough to make an old man young again?"

Mr. Smith did not answer. He gave one quick sad glance over the quiet landscape stretching away in the distance, and then, turning to the book-shelves, looked at the titles of the volumes I had collected in the course of a long and lonely life.

CHAPTER XI

MR. RODEWALD.

WE were at tea. Upon the whole Mrs. Brooker had provided an impromptu meal which, if unfashionable in the *variety and abundance* of the edibles set forth, at least did *no discredit* to the liberality of the house.

"I never was so hungry in my life," observed Mr. Rodewald, helping himself to a second and plentiful plateful of cold ham. "Why don't you eat, Smith?"

"Because I am not hungry," answered Mr. Smith, laconically; and then he finished his cup of tea, and asked for another with a solemnity which was perfectly appalling.

Upon the whole, I could not avoid feeling that Mr. Smith was somewhat of a wet blanket. He would not talk, he would not eat. When Mr. Rodewald addressed him he answered in the curtest manner possible; when I asked him a question, he replied in monosyllables; the only thing he seemed to care for was tea, and that he drank in, to my mind, a comfortless and forlorn misanthropical manner, without cream or sugar.

All at once he unbent; cutting Mr. Rodewald short in a pleasing course of cross-examination, he said,

"Well, Mr. Cheverley, and so the daisies and the buttercups have not realised all your expectations. You have found Arcadia a trifle dull, and country life, though a charming idyl in theory, apt to become somewhat monotonous in practice."

Mr. Rodewald laid down his knife and fork as his friend began his sentence, and when he had finished flashed a glance towards me, which said more plainly than any spoken words could have done, "I am proud of this man; listen to him, he is very clever—that is why I have taken him up."

It was the look a proud mother wears, when her show child opens its lips to delight an admiring audience with some precocious sentence; a schoolmaster's face might have assumed the same expression, the while a crack pupil was successfully undergoing some severe test of his learning. In a moment I seemed to arrive at a vague understanding of the position. This was the patron to whom Mr. Smith had referred so slightly, and yet with such emphasis. In some way Mr. Rodewald was master of this gaunt, sad-faced, bitter-tongued man; held him as captive of his bow and spear, and dragged him at the chariot wheels of his own worldly prosperity—a goodly exposition of the difference between genius and success.

That glance was a revelation; and almost involuntarily I looked towards Mr. Smith to ascertain if he had observed

it also. No, evidently not. He was playing with his teaspoon—fiddling idly with any object within reach, which is so characteristic of nervous and excitable people, his eyes turned towards my end of the table, waiting for an answer.

"I do not think I am tired of the country," I said, wondering in my heart whether I was or not.

"And yet you want to leave it; want to leave this pretty little place where you have only set up your household gods for about a twelvemonth."

"It is household gods he lacks," interposed Mr. Rodewald. "If there were half a dozen rosy faces gathered round this table, Mr. Cheverley would not desire to turn wanderer."

"I was not speaking of children," said Mr. Smith, pettishly. "Only of the Lares and Penates—the well-filled bookshelves, the neat and appropriate engravings, the comfortable easy-chair, the piano I heard you trying, the cocks and hens, the creepers trained about the windows; all these things I have been told become a part and parcel of a man's inner consciousness; and yet he is going to leave them—going to, figuratively, tear himself in sunder."

"Parting with your household gods will never cause you a regret, I should think," observed Mr. Rodewald.

"We are not talking now of John Smith, but of Mr. Cheverley," retorted the other. "Come," he added, turning once more to me, "confess, the country has proved a failure; the summer days have seemed long, and the winter evenings dreary; all the men have not proved honest, or all the women virtuous; you have found out that, even in the rural districts, there is a seamy side to life, which side is most frequently presented for consideration when one is living within earshot of the nightingales—within scent of the roses."

"You may be quite right," I answered; "but really you must not come to me to decide the matter for you. I have nothing to confess, for I know almost as little of rural social existence as when I left London. If I were residing in Lamb's Conduit Street I could not be more ignorant of the inner life of Reedbourne than is the case now."

"But, residing in the country, you must have become *interested* in the doings of its inhabitants?"

"I assure you, no. I care as little for them as they do for me."

"Which may mean that you and they both care a great deal."

"But which means nothing of the kind," I replied. "My reasons for wishing to leave Reedbourne for a time have nothing to do with the place or the people. I like the place as well as it is probable I shall ever like any place; and, for the people, I know nothing whatever about them."

"But you have friends—society," struck in Mr. Rodewald. "There must be very good society in a neighbourhood such as this?"

"Very possibly; I know nothing about it."

"But, my good sir, consider, you cannot have lived twelve months in the place without forming a connection of some sort?"

"You mean, I suppose, a visiting connection?" I said, thinking that there were some points in common between my niece and Mr. Rodewald. "There are, I believe, people who do make acquaintances in the most unlikely places, but I am not one of them. I knew nobody at Reedbourne when I first came down to look at this cottage, and if I had lived here for twenty years I do not suppose I should know anybody."

"You except the clergyman, of course?" persisted Mr. Rodewald, clinging to straws.

"I except no one," I answered, firmly. "If we come to terms about this place I can let you the house, but I can't let you the society, not even that of the local clergy."

"Evidently, then, you will not be expected to subscribe to the old women's flannel petticoat club, or the school-children's pocket-handkerchief ditto," suggested Mr. Smith, hopefully.

"Do be quiet for a minute," said Mr. Rodewald. "I want clearly to understand what Mr. Cheverley means. Do you really imply that you are not on speaking terms with your own rector?"

"Can't you let him alone, Rodewald?" asked Mr. Smith. "He is evidently a pestilent Dissenter, or a malignant unbeliever, or a Turk, Jew, heretic, or infidel of so outrageous a complexion that even the clergy won't try to convert him."

"I am not a Dissenter, or an infidel, or a heathen," I explained, observing that Mr. Rodewald was becoming impatient; "but I might be for all I know of the rectory of Reedbourne and his curate. I have listened to the preaching, I have subscribed small amounts to the local charities, I have travelled with the greater and the less dignitary—our 'beloved rector,' as the curate calls his chief, and 'our dear curate,' as the rector calls his aide-camp—and I repeat, they are no acquaintances of mine and they should be no acquaintances of mine if I lived Reedbourne for fifty years."

Mr. Smith shook his head gloomily when I finished, one who might say, "You are doomed;" but, as though weary of the conversation, Mr. Rodewald rose from the table, and, walking to the window, stood looking over his possessions.

"I think," he began at last, after a silence which had become irksome, "I should very much like to take a long ramble round the neighbourhood. Do you happen to know Mr. Cheverley, if there is any inn at Reedbourne where one could get decent accommodation for the night?"

Mr. Smith lifted his eyes, and looked at the speaker with amazement; while I modestly placed the two bedrooms, occupied till recently by Bessie and her friend, at the service of my visitors.

Mr. Rodewald hesitated, but his companion said, speaking to him,

"I must get back to town."

"Then I think, if Mr. Cheverley is quite sure I shall not be disturbing his arrangements, that I will avail myself of his offer," decided Mr. Rodewald. "You can send a telegram for me, Smith, so that they may not be uneasy at home?"

"I can do more than that," replied Mr. Smith. "I will take a note to Miss Lydney, if you like to write it."

"Well, you are a good fellow. Mr. Cheverley, may I trouble you for a scrap of paper?"

"You will find everything you require in my study," answered; and then I followed Mr. Smith, who had wandered across the hall, and out into the open air. He held his hat in one hand, and was smoothing the nap round and round with the other when I joined him.

"You really want to let this place and go away, I suppose?" he said.

"Really and truly," I answered.

"Well, I daresay you are right. It is a pretty little spot; but living always in one corner of the earth, with nothing to do in it, must be a shade duller than playing at whist with double dummy. "Besides," he added hastily "the heart knoweth its own bitterness," and each man can judge best what is likely to compass his happiness. Personally, I have no passionate affection for the country; and yet if I owned this cottage—"

"I am going abroad," I explained, as he paused expressively and looked about him.

"You think you have lived among books long enough, and now want to see men and places?"

"That is about my meaning."

"After the first plunge you will find it a change for the better. People who can travel should travel—should collect memories of unclouded skies to refresh their souls our November weather—should try to see countries where life is not so hard, so prosaic, and so unlovely as it here. But all this is not what I wanted to say. What was it? O, I remember!"

He gave his hat another brush, and continued:

"As you really wish to let this place, I may tell you that you could not find a better tenant than Rodewald. He is very sweet upon The Snuggery, I can see that; but he won't give you what you ask in the way of rent. He will eat you down—he will dispute every inch of ground with you. Wise folks say you cannot draw blood out of a stone, but I declare that Rodewald can. His specialty is to get shilling's worth for every sixpence he expends. Upon the other hand, he will take care of your furniture as if it were his own, and pay what he agrees to do punctually. You need not be afraid of finding a single book dog-eared missing on your return. Miss Lydney, his sister-in-law, the best of managers; and his two little girls are, to my mind, charming."

"What about his wife?"

"She has been dead for years. His affection for her and the girls is the one soft spot in an otherwise stony nature. After all, however, you know weak amiable people

are not always the best to deal with in business ; and you will find Mr. Rodewald a good tenant if you care to accept him."

At this moment Mr. Rodewald himself came out with the note he had just written.

"You are quite sure it won't take you out of your way ?" he said, addressing his friend.

"Quite sure it will be a great pleasure to me to deliver it. For the present, good-bye, Rodewald ; do not lose yourself in the wilds of Surrey. Good-bye, Mr. Cheverley ;" and he would have shaken hands with me in farewell then, but I said I would walk beside him as far as the gate.

There we parted. Over the top bar I stood looking after him as he paced along the hot, dusty road.

Tall, gaunt, ungainly he appeared, with the relentless sun streaming from the west full upon his remarkable figure ; but I had taken a liking to the man. He interested and perplexed me, and I, the least curious of living beings, caught myself wondering concerning his antecedents, marvelling whence he came, and what the story was which had driven him, a mere waif and stray, out upon the world. When I returned to the house Mr. Rodewald astonished me by laying his hand on my shoulder and asking,

"What was that eccentric fellow saying to you ?"

"He was saying what a good tenant I should find you if we come to terms," I answered, only suppressing some portion of the truth.

"He is a faithful creature," commented his patron, smiling ; "a very strange character, but faithful. I have been able to serve him a little, and he is grateful ; and in these days, Mr. Cheverley, gratitude is not a common quality. He was in one of his most contrary moods to-day ; but I humour him, and take no notice—probably you remarked that. Smith is a man for whom I entertain a very great regard. Some one says we generally do like those we have been able to befriend ; and there is much truth in the observation. He is a wonderfully clever fellow ; could do *anything* if he only gave his mind to it ; but he won't—*there is the pity—he will not.*"

I made no reply. Behind the blame, behind the praise

a story lay, I felt quite sure—a story, the length and depth and pathos and misery of which this man who spoke had never—could never—grasp.

Life is a curious tangle altogether ; but there is perhaps nothing more curious about it than the affinities of utter strangers—the way in which people “take,” as nurses say of children, to those who at first sight might seem most antagonistic to them.

Heaven knows, Mr. Smith was not a person to whom it would have struck any one as probable the heart of a shy recluse was likely to go forth ; but something about him—some turn of thought, some trick of expression, some far-away look in his perplexing eyes—attracted and puzzled me.

While we were sitting at tea I imagined that if it were only possible to ascertain the nature of the link which tied two such different men together, some clue might be gained to the mystery of Mr. Smith's life ; but now I abandoned that conjecture as untenable. Mr. Rodewald's knowledge of his companion was evidently slight and superficial. He might, as he said, have been acquainted with him for years—been even intimate, as the world accounts such matters—but he certainly did not understand his nature.

Whatever of tenderness, of pathos, of sorrow, of sin, of suffering, lay deep in a man's heart, and in that past which had left him the mystery he was, were matters, I felt satisfied, quite outside Mr. Rodewald's cognisance.

“He writes reviews, I think he told me,” I said, as we re-entered the house.

“Reviews or anything else ; nothing comes amiss to him. He is on one of the comic periodicals ; turns out verses for the Christmas annuals ; runs stories through the penny papers ; has had what he calls a ‘big book’ of some sort on the stocks for years ; might be a celebrated man if he would make up his mind to settle down to regular work, but he can't ; and so, while fellows who have not half his brains are making their thousands a year, he grubs along in a couple of dingy rooms up two pairs of stairs in New Inn.”

“He is not married, I suppose ?”

“Married !” repeated Mr. Rodewald, scornfully. “Does he look as if he were married ? Why, that is what I am always dinning into his ears. Bless your soul, a good

managing woman would be the salvation of him ; that is, always supposing he did not break her heart in a week."

"Why should he break her heart?" I asked.

"Drinks like a fish."

"O," I said.

"That's it," explained Mr. Rodewald ; "that's the curse ; not but what I will say for Smith that he can be as steady as anybody when he likes. It is a curious fact, but it is true, that so long as matters are going badly with him he is as steady as possible, but the minute things begin to mend he flies to the bottle. Independent of the sincere liking I have for him, that is one reason why I keep him so much under my own eye. I don't mean to seem boastful, but I do sometimes feel I stand between that man and utter degradation. If it had not been for me, I believe he would have gone to the devil headlong years ago."

I scarcely knew what to answer. Of my own knowledge I could not, of course, tell where Mr. Smith might have been but for the presence of this guardian angel ; but yet Mr. Rodewald looked to me a man more likely to give a helping shove along the road indicated, than to stand between a friend and perdition. On the whole, therefore, it was a relief when Mr. Rodewald announced his intention to go out for a look round the neighbourhood.

"I do not ask you to accompany me," he said, with a good assumption of cordiality, "because I am sure you are tired, and because also you must know every inch of the country off by heart."

For answer I only said that I did feel rather tired ; and then he set off alone, to make, as I felt certain, inquiries about me and The Snuggery. That he never trusted fully the word of any man was a conviction I could not shake off. It had been borne in upon me at about the same stage of our acquaintanceship as when I began to suspect that Mr. Rodewald's own statements were sometimes—shall I say?—plausible.

Yes ; plausible is not a bad word to express the meaning desired to be conveyed. He did not exactly lie, but he contrived to put such a gloss on things that they seemed other than they were. Perhaps he had learned this art in *the City*, which place he called by some very hard names. *Indeed, before he retired for the night he tried to make me*

believe he was about the only honest man in it. Upon the other hand, however, he might have brought the trick over with him when he came from Germany, a mere lad.

If it had been possible for me to do so, I should have liked him on account of his nationality, but it was impossible. I think he felt this, because he obviously tried to make himself agreeable and—failed.

About nine o'clock he returned, jubilant, enchanted with the neighbourhood, delighted with the air, charmed with the people.

"The natives are wonderfully civil," he said; "never had so many hats touched to me before in one evening in my life. Suppose they mistook me for some other person."

Then we sat down to supper, he declaring he had a wolfish appetite; and he was pleased to express himself in favourable terms with regard to Mrs. Brooker's cookery, and, to prove his praise sincere, by doing ample justice to the viands set before him.

After the modest meal—for modest it was, though we had set out the best our larder boasted—Mr. Rodewald proceeded to business.

"I am a man of a very few words," he was good enough to tell me, taking the pipe he had asked permission to light out of his mouth, and puffing a little cloud of smoke into the air, "so I will just come to the point at once. I like your place, but I don't like your rent."

"I can't tell you," he said after a pause, finding I made no answer, "how beautiful I think Reedbourne; what a peaceful feeling comes to me as I sit here with you, far away from all the noise and bustle and weariness of that great wicked London. This is the spot I have dreamed of—the spot I should delight to live in; but I am not a rich man, Mr. Cheverley, and I have two motherless little girls, whose future I must assure. That is the plain state of the case."

And he put his pipe between his lips again, with the air of one whose feeling was—"I have spoken."

"You mean to make some proposition, I conclude?" was the remark I naturally hazarded. That it would be of the slightest use for me to make a proposition was an idea which never crossed my mind. The right to say "yes," the power to say "no," it might be that the liberty to utter

these words still remained with me ; but to originate anything, to suggest modifications of my former demands, it was Mr. Rodewald I felt who alone could undertake such enterprises.

He did not answer me verbally. Engaged in breathing fresh life into his pipe, he simply nodded his head, produced an old envelope and a stump of pencil, and commenced working out a series of problems.

By the time he had finished his pipe was again well alight, so well established, indeed, that he was able to hold it between his fingers while he spoke to me.

"You want to go abroad," he began ; "I don't know your reasons, and I won't ask your reasons, but I take it for granted you have reasons for so wishing, or you would not strive to let your house."

"You are quite correct so far," I said ; "pray proceed."

"I also take it for granted, as I think I may, that those reasons are quite unconnected with any pecuniary difficulty."

"You may take it for granted, Mr. Rodewald, that my reasons are purely personal, and concern myself alone," I retorted.

"Gently, gently, gently," he entreated, and smoked on for a few moments, apparently with the design of permitting me to regain the composure he spoke of.

"I want you clearly to understand, before we go any further," he began again, after a little while, "that in any remark I make nothing can be further from my intention than to give offence. Inadvertently this might happen, for I am unhappily one of the bluntest of men. All I meant was that you wish to let this place less for pecuniary advantage than because you desire to go abroad."

"I fear I scarcely follow your meaning."

"In a word, you did not buy The Snuggery and furnish it with a view to a possible profitable investment."

"I certainly did not buy it with a view to losing money."

"That is quite another matter. I repeat, you had at first no idea of re-letting. I know you had not, because otherwise you would have advertised it in the beginning of the season, when possibly you might have made your market."

"*You are right,*" I replied ; "but what has all this to do *with matters as they stand?*"

"Just this," he said, boldly. "You want less to make money than not to lose money by taking a tenant, and I want a furnished house at a rent I can afford. If you fail to get a tenant you must either remain here, or leave a caretaker in charge; if I am unable to obtain a furnished house on reasonable terms, I must take an unfurnished house and buy furniture. That, I take it, is the state of the case as far as we both are concerned. And now, having made the ground clear, I can proceed to my proposition."

As I sat and looked at him, fitting his sentences and shaping the conversation to his own ends, pausing now and then to draw a whiff of that pipe which seemed so difficult to keep alight, I could not help thinking of Mother Rigby and the place whence "Dickon" supplied the coal which kept the flame alive.

Mephistopheles, as we have seen him represented, was different enough in appearance from this square-shouldered, clean-skinned, bluff-looking German; and yet the idea Mr. Rodewald suggested to me was that of something not quite "canny."

Upon the whole, I wished I had not been in such a hurry to proffer hospitality. In the middle of the night I knew I should awake and remember, with a sort of nightmare oppression, that this man was resting under the same roof with me; perhaps even then lying with wide-open eyes considering some scheme of narrow diplomacy.

Then, however, I thought of what Mr. Smith had said, and took comfort. Though the tenant proposed was hard as steel, he might be strictly honest. If only one half he stated and implied about himself were true, the taint of original sin which induced me to doubt him must indeed have been strong!

"Here," recommenced Mr. Rodewald, again referring to his notes, "I have jotted down something near the amount this place must have cost you. Of course, the figure is considerably above actual value, for I see you are not much of a hand at a bargain, and have allowed for that accordingly."

"I wish, Mr. Rodewald, you would make your proposition, and let us be done with the business."

"All in good time," he answered, laughing. "I will tell you what I can do in a minute. I have lumped the *sum-total of your expenditure at that*," and he pointed to

some figures on one side of the paper. "If you turn over the leaf you will see how I come to that amount. Now I am willing to give you a rent which will pay five per cent. upon your outlay, and to undertake to keep the house and land in good order. As I said before, I am not a rich man, but I think I may say without vanity that I am a good tenant."

And Dickon, without being asked, bringing in another coal for his pipe, he smoked away with that keen enjoyment which, indeed, I believe is never experienced save when the light is furnished from the particular "chimney-corner" Mother Rigby affected.

I glanced at the paper and—kept my temper. Yes, kept it, though the purchase-money was calculated at fifty pounds less than I had paid for the "Desirable Freehold Residence," &c., &c.; though he had appraised the value of my chairs and tables at about the price a keen broker would have offered for them very second-hand; though he omitted the grand piano *in toto*, and made as light of my improvements as though they had been the holiday sport of a foolish child.

He had been making inquiries, exactly as I imagined he would. It is true I knew the business of no one in the neighbourhood, but it is equally true every one in the neighbourhood knew all about mine.

It is perhaps a drawback to the pleasures of the country that amongst the "daisies and buttercups," little birds are continually flying to and fro, carrying stories—false and true—from ear to ear, as far and as freely as the winds do the thistle-down.

Here, however, was a man who must appreciate this rural innocency—this child-like hankering after trivial knowledge.

Reedbourne must approve him, and he approve of Reedbourne. What a man this to enjoy the gossip of the trains—to listen to the petty tattle of the frequenters of the lecture-hall, and the clubs attached to the better class of public-house! What a man to feel the origin and the meanness of Sir Burke Robinson, themes not too high for him to enter on; and the length and colour of Mary Jane's *petticoat*, not beneath his attention! What a detective he *would have made*! All these thoughts, and many more to

a like effect, passed through my mind as I sat silent, looking at the paper he had given me, and wondering, with that sort of second consciousness we sometimes seem to possess, whether I should decline his offer peremptorily, or close with it on the spot.

But for Smith I must have elected the former course ; but I did most heartily wish to get away, and Smith had said the man, though he could get blood out of a stone, would stick to any bargain he made, and prove in every respect an admirable tenant. I could leave Reedbourne with a clear conscience and an easy mind. I might pack up and depart. Already my thoughts had transported me across the Channel—already I was essaying in strange tongues to express my wants—already I was treading the streets of unfamiliar towns, when Mr. Rodewald broke in upon my reverie.

"Well," he said, quietly, "what is it to be?"

I came back with a start to The Snuggery and to present events. If I had just returned from dreamland, it could not have seemed stranger to me than it did to find myself sitting in that familiar room with Mr. Rodewald for *vis-à-vis*.

"Have you made up your mind?" he asked, finding I did not immediately answer. "Is it to be 'yes' or 'no'?"

"There is no account taken here of the piano," I said. "Add ten pounds to your offer, and you can have the house and the use of everything it contains for one year."

"Bravo!" cried Mr. Rodewald. "I agree;" and he held out his hand.

As he was so extremely cordial, I could do no less than give him mine; and thus our bargain was concluded.

Within ten minutes he had drawn up two copies of an agreement, which we signed in the presence of Mrs. Brooker, who regarded us during the ceremony as if we had been engaged in celebrating some vague and mystical rite.

Mr. Rodewald folded up his copy and placed it in his pocket, and I did the same by mine.

"I suppose," said the new tenant, as he stood with his chamber candlestick in his hand, "there is some place near here where I can have a good swim in the morning?"

I shook my head, and answered,

"Not nearer than the Thames, I am afraid."

"Thames—nonsense!" he exclaimed. "That Reed seems deep enough, in all conscience."

"There is only one good bathing-place upon it," I explained; "and the man who owns the land makes some difficulty about a right of way."

Mr. Rodewald put down his candle again.

"What do you mean?" he said, interested and alert upon the instant.

"He wants to stop up a path leading along the river's bank."

"And has he a right to do so?"

"I imagine not. The 'oldest inhabitant' remembers the path being used by the public as long as he can remember anything."

"Then of course he can't stop it up."

"I don't know who is to prevent him," I answered.

"Why, the people of Reedbourne. They must value that path."

"I daresay they do; but still, I suppose, they do not care to fight the battle. Labourers and shopkeepers have not much cash to spare for lawyers."

"But I referred to the gentry—to those interested in the soil—those willing to spend some money for the purpose of retaining such a privilege."

I laughed aloud.

"My dear sir," I said, "the gentry of Reedbourne are perfectly indifferent on the subject. What can a field-path more or less signify to people who never walk—who, I am sure, must have lost the use of their legs years ago?"

"What do you mean?"

"That everybody drives. A carriage of some kind is the seal of distinction; walking is the sign of the beast. If you want to become famous here, Mr. Rodewald, you had better keep a donkey-cart rather than no conveyance at all."

For a moment Mr. Rodewald's brow darkened. Into my speech I knew I had flung a certain amount of malicious meaning, and he was not so stupid as to fail to *notice the fact*. Immediately, however, his face cleared, and quite beamed with smiles as he bade me good-night.

I do not think I am wrong in imagining that Mr.

Rodewald went to bed with the determination of conquering Reedbourne.

For some time I heard him marching about his room, as if he were crushing the pampered inhabitants under his feet.

Fancies of this kind, concerning the greatness one may achieve in strange places, are very pleasant sometimes, and help to while away a leisure half-hour agreeably enough.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RIGHT OF WAY.

NEXT morning, before Mrs. Brooker had exchanged her night-cap for the more fashionable, though not more elaborate, head-gear she wore during the day, Mr. Rodewald was astir.

The hour was early ; but even had it not been, I hold no discredit is reflected upon me by the fact that I was still steeped in slumber. For many a long year I punctually entered the office of the " Home and Foreign " precisely as the clock struck nine ; but that feat of continuous punctuality, so far from spurring me on to deeds of greater daring as regarded early rising, rather increased my natural man's love for the silken joys involved in a morning nap.

Most entirely do I agree with Elia in considering early rising a Pagan observance.

If a man must get up, if " he have a suit to solicit or affairs to manage," why, he must be astir and about his business whenever necessity calls, and there is an end of it ; but to tell me that, of his own free will, a rational being elects to rise with the lark, is to tell me something which I am, of course, bound to believe, but which I confess, I cannot understand.

Why, morning is the very best part of all the night ; the light soft sleep which visits the eyelids when the sun is up and looking after his business is the sweetest and most refreshing in all the hours of rest.

It is easy to forgive a visitor almost any other sin than

that of early rising. Let him in his own house get up with the lark, or the musical thrush, which is a very much earlier bird than the other less indefatigable songster ; but in no strange man's house has he a right to bestir himself at such hours that he finds the establishment, so to speak, in curl-papers.

I might have known, even from my slight acquaintance with him, that Mr. Rodewald was just the person to seize the opportunity afforded, by the fact of a household being off guard, to take undisturbed note of its shortcomings ; but I never thought of the possibility of any one getting up early who could lie in bed late.

When he went downstairs, Mrs. Brooker was, as she afterwards told me, "huddling on her clothes ;" and, although the time my housekeeper devoted to her morning toilette was painfully short, I'll be bound it proved long enough for Mr. Rodewald to take note of such details as might have escaped his observation overnight, and to form more decided opinions as to my utter incapacity to rule a household.

"He come into the dairy," explained Mrs. Brooker, when she subsequently alluded to the circumstance—"come into the dairy as cool as if it belonged to him, and says, 'Mrs. Brooker' (he had got my name as pat as could be), 'Mrs. Brooker, *would* you be so very good as to give me a cup of milk, and tell me the nearest way through Mr. Milter's farm to the Reed?' I was not away a minute getting a tumbler, but he knew everything that was on the shelves by the time I came back, as well as I do.

"Lor ! the questions he did ask, to be sure ; what this was for, and that ; why I had not glazed pans, and what I used for scalding out the wooden vessels. You remember, sir, there is a tray up on one of the shelves with some old musical glasses, I think you call them, half of them broken ; they are in the darkest corner, quite out of sight, in a manner of speaking ; but he asked me why they were laid away, and if nobody cared for them, and made the remark it was a pity we had no lady about the house, or young daughters, to take an interest in 'things of that sort, and suchlike.'"

"And what answer did you make, Mrs. Brooker ?" I inquired, wondering whether she told the signal failure

trying to interest *one* young girl in the musical glasses, to say nothing of Shakespeare, had proved.

"Well, sir, I was busy; and I thought, as he made so free with questions, I would be as free with my answers; so I just said, 'For my part I wanted no ladies, young or old, about any house I lived in.'"

"'What! not fond of your own sex, Mrs. Brooker?' gibing like.

"'No, I ain't,' I said; 'and for that matter, sir, I'm none too fond of yours.'

"At that he went away, laughing, as fast as ever he could walk, swinging his towels as he went."

This was afterwards, as already stated, when Mrs. Brooker knew for certain Mr. Rodewald had taken The Snuggery, and meant to dispense with her services.

On the morning when my guest rose so early to go, like an innocent lamb, out all alone into the meadows, Mrs. Brooker condoning his sins—which, from her point of view, were many—bestirred herself to prepare a breakfast worthy of the excellent appetite we knew Mr. Rodewald possessed.

Everything was ready, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say in readiness. The kettle boiled, the board was spread. Water-cresses, fresh from the brook; lettuces, with the tender crispness of youth visible in their white and firm, but not too gigantic, hearts; fruit, nestling among cool leaves; honey in the comb; cream, golden, and in abundant quantity. These things, with a few roses arranged in an antique china bowl, gave a look of homely prettiness to the table, covered with a snowy cloth.

But it was in the kitchen that Mrs. Brooker's best welcome lay. There were the fish, well floured, and ready to pop into the hissing pan; there were rolls Mrs. Brooker's own hands had prepared for the delectation of our visitor; there were likewise eggs fresh from the nest; trim rashers of bacon; mushrooms gathered that morning in meadows where the mist had lain white and low overnight; and a few kidneys, procured with difficulty from the local butcher, who stated it to be his opinion "some folks believed sheep had a dozen of them apiece."

Time passed on, and still Mr. Rodewald tarried. Nine, half-past nine, ten, half-past ten, and still no Mr. Rodewald.

"*I do hope he ain't gone and drowned hisself,*" remarked

Mrs. Brooker, who had gone through all a cook's stages of impatience, irritability, resentment, and anxiety. "Whatever gentlemen can want going and bathing themselves in a dirty river—and I am sure the Reed is none so clean—when they could have a pailful of nice soft water at home, is a puzzle to me."

"He's coming," said Matthew, at this juncture appearing with some runners for dinner. "I see him as I crossed t' fold-yard, walking fit to break his neck, his head bare, and a-wiping his head as if he were rubbing down a horse."

In an instant all was activity. Upon the air there arose an odour of coffee—a goodly smell of cooking. Bacon frizzled, fish browned, a cake was brought smoking hot out of the oven; as if touched by the wand of an enchanter, everything seemed to be set going. Mrs. Brooker, bustling about, gave Matthew fifty commands in a breath, while I, leaving the kitchen door, whither the sound of my house-keeper's lamentations had drawn me, walked across the hall, and out into the air to meet my visitor, who came on to meet me at full speed.

"Thought I was gone to the bottom, I suppose?" he cried, panting from the rate at which he had walked. "I am very sorry to have seemed so rude, but I could not help it. Look at my clothes."

Thus requested, I did look at them, as, indeed, without being requested, I had done previously.

"What has happened?" I asked. "Have you met with an accident? Where did you pick up those things?"

He burst out laughing.

"Neat, are not they? I flatter myself I should create a sensation if I walked down the Poultry in this costume. Will you allow me to sit down with you as I am? There is a hunger upon me which is simply indescribable. Let me have a crust of something to eat, and I will tell you all."

When he had quite done, he pushed back his chair, drew out a pipe, different from that he had used on the previous evening, filled it from a pouch which likewise looked strange to my eyes, asked for a match, indulged in a few puffs, and began:

"When I left here this morning (it seems ages since), I went out in the best possible temper. I was softened by

the tender beauty of the early day. My thoughts went back—back to a summer long ago, when I was young, and walked through the pleasant meadows—not alone—but, there, why do I talk about such things to you? The only mistress whose smile you ever tried to win was the 'Home and Foreign;' the only love-letters you ever wrote were answers to intending insurers."

He paused for a reply, but I only inclined my head.

"But bah! what has all this to do with my adventure?" continued Mr. Rodewald, waving his hand as one who should say, "Sentiment, I can now dispense with you." "I went on and on till I came, as I had been told I should, to a gate—a quite new gate—made of barked and divided pine, securely hung on its hinges and safely padlocked. Over that gate I vaulted, and was proceeding quite at my leisure through a very large field where many cows were grazing, when I heard someone shouting, 'Hi, there! turn back—turn back! no road this way!'"

"Looking to see whence these sounds came, I saw in the distance, hurrying along a different path from that I was traversing, a person waving his hat, and gesticulating violently.

"'You must go back,' he said. 'This is private property, and no one has a right here except by permission of the owner.'

"'Indeed!' I answered. 'May I ask who says so?'"

"'I say so,' he replied.

"'And may I further ask, who you are who say so?'"

"'I am the owner, Saul Milter;' and he struck an attitude, feeling, apparently, he had made a point.

"I put my hand in the breast-pocket of my coat, pulled out my case, and presented him with a card.

"'There is my name and address,' I said, 'and if you consider you can take any action for trespass against me I shall be happy to hear from your solicitor. Good-morning, Mr. Milter. I am delighted to have had the opportunity of making your acquaintance.'

"And raising my hat, I would have passed him, but that Mr. Milter, a coarse brute, with a red face and a vulgar tongue, barred my passage, and declared, with an oath, he was not delighted to make mine, and that he would be——(many things unfit for ears polite) if he let a——(many other

things which would sound disgusting, were I to repeat them), beard him, Saul Milter, on the land he had bought and paid for, by——”

“‘I don’t want to beard you,’ I explained. ‘I only want to go and bathe.’

“‘Then go and bathe somewhere else, and be——to you!’

“I told him I did not want to go somewhere else and be——; that the Reed was quite good enough for me.

“‘Well, you ain’t a-going to the Reed through my fields,’ he persisted.

“‘Indeed! who will prevent me?’

“‘I will,’ he said. ‘Look here, you had best go back; you had, upon my conscience. I don’t want to do you a damage.’

“‘You had better not try,’ I suggested, and endeavoured to pass him.

“After that I can scarcely tell you what happened. We had a bit of a scrimmage, I know. He was not gentle, and my blood was up. The minute he laid his hand on me I laid my fist on him, and with such effect that he soon gave up the struggle, and went on his way, holding an old cotton handkerchief to his nose, while I proceeded on mine without further interruption.

“You remember, perhaps, that in the little wood which surrounds the ruins of what was once a caretaker’s cottage, there is a great oak-tree by the water’s edge, with a rustic seat beautifully placed, so as to command a tranquil view. Upon that seat I placed my clothes, and, plunging into the Reed, had such a swim! I went a long way up the stream, all fringed with alders and reeds and rushes, and long grasses and wildflowers. Ah, my dear fellow, you do not know the amount of enjoyment you have lost by not knowing how to swim!”

“No doubt,” I agreed.

By this time, short as had been our acquaintance, I was so accustomed to Mr. Rodewald pointing the moral of his utterances by some pitying or disparaging allusion to myself, that I almost looked for such conclusions to his sentences. He seemed to me one of those persons who *can never quite satisfy themselves that a statement is*

true unless they confirm it by the assertion of something diametrically opposite.

Just as self-sufficient as Jack Horner, Mr. Rodewald would not, however, have rested content with saying :

"What a good boy am I !"

It was essential, in his opinion, to cap the assertion with — "What a bad boy are you !"

For the nonce I, Reuben Cheverley, was selected as the illustration of Mr. Rodewald's superiority. It was not enough for him to sentimentalise about walking through the meadows with a young woman, but he must assume I had never done so. The pleasure of his dip was incomplete till contrasted with the picture of myself doomed to a perpetuity of dry land.

"It was delightful, floating back with the stream. Without any exertion I was carried once again to the point from whence I started. I knew by the sun it must be more than eight o'clock ; so without further delay, though the water was tempting, I made for land, and sought my towels, which I had left on the bank. They were gone—there was not a sign of them ; then I looked towards the bench where my clothes should have been—it was empty and bare ! Conceive, if you can, my feelings."

Mr. Rodewald paused, in order to give me the opportunity of exerting my imaginative powers ; but, seeing that they were quite unequal to the task suggested, he resumed, not without a certain triumph in his expression.

"At any rate, there I was, in a strange place, without a rag of clothing, out of sight and sound, as I imagined, of anybody who could help me. For a moment I stood appalled ; but I need not tell you that it never takes me long to make up my mind how to act in a difficulty.

"I have done very well in life, and I attribute almost the entire of my success to my ability of thinking clearly and rapidly, and of acting with promptitude. You follow me ?" and Mr. Rodewald stopped again for the clapping he felt I ought to accord.

I did not give vent, however, to any burst of admiration. I merely answered "that I *did* follow him, and that I was anxious to know what had become of his clothes. Were they stolen, for instance ; had he gained any clue to the

thief?" but Mr. Rodewald silenced me with a wave of his hand.

"I decided what to do instantly," he went on. "I must go back into the water, and, since help was unlikely to come to me, let the river bear me to help. If I trusted myself to its guidance I could not fail to reach some habitation; so after one more look round, I was on the point of again launching myself when a 'Holloa!' caused me to turn my head and glance across stream. There, almost hidden among the overhanging branches of some drooping willows, growing close down on the bank, I saw a boat which I had previously overlooked; indeed, had it not been for the figure of a man who stood up in it and parted the branches, I could scarcely have discerned it then.

"'Holloa!' he shouted again, and I answered him.

"'Lost your togs?' he asked.

"'Yes; do you happen to know what has become of them?'

"'I don't,' he answered; 'but Steve here does;' and so saying, he pushed the boat out from under the shade of the willows, and, taking his sculls, pulled across to my side of the river. It was a toy-boat, painted blue and red and green, like a humming-top, and it looked too small to hold both the man who had spoken to me, and a lad of twelve years old or thereabouts.

"'Now, Steve, open your mouth, and tell the gentleman what you told me.'

"Steve, thus entreated, dipped one dirty finger in the water, and began drawing it backwards and forwards along the gunwale of the boat.

"'Come, open your mouth,' said his master. 'You saw Dan Byers make up a bundle of clothes that were lying on the bench, tie them up in a towel, and go off with the lot.'

"'Yes, I see him,' answered the boy.

"'And you shouted, and asked him what game he was up to. And he told you to mind your own business, did not he?'

"'Yes, or he'd crack me over the head when he got me ashore.'

"At this point I asked who Mr. Dan Byers might be.

" 'He's old Milter's bailiff, or foreman, or whatever you call it,' answered the gentleman in boating costume.

" 'I thought for an instant; I was indeed still thinking when my new friend asked,

" 'Had not Steve better run up to the farm and ask for your belongings? You can't stay in the water all day, you know.'

" 'There seemed nothing else to be done under the circumstances, so Steve was put ashore on the bank nearest Mr. Milter's residence, and started off leaving me almost convulsed with laughter. I declare, Mr. Cheverley, I promised the lad a shilling, and told him to wait till I gave him my card, though I had not a garment upon me except my skin. So strong is the force of habit, and so great is my sense of the ridiculous, that when Mr. Hinton, the gentleman who had come to my rescue, asked out of which pocket I proposed to produce my credentials, the idea so tickled me that I quite forgot to be angry with Farmer Milter. You have not known me long enough, Mr. Cheverley, perhaps, to notice how keen is my appreciation of humour, but I can declare it has carried me merrily through many a difficult position. Every one is not so constituted. Very few persons, indeed, have the slightest perception of the ridiculous. It is a sense which ought to be more cultivated."

Had I been asked my opinion, I should scarcely have given Mr. Rodewald credit for the faculty he claimed to possess, but, as a rule, Mr. Rodewald rendered all expression of opinion unnecessary by assertion.

" 'How did your messenger speed?' I asked, by way of expediting his narrative.

" 'He came back without the clothes. Mr. Milter said if I wanted them I must fetch them; and Dan Byers, Milter's henchman, told the lad if he caught him sneaking across the meadows again, he would give him a taste of his whip, and set the dogs on him besides."

" 'Your acquaintance in the boat then, I suppose, supplied the suit you have on?'"

" 'Yes; to quote his own words, he 'rigged me out' in some 'togs' belonging to his brother."

" 'Shall I send to Mr. Milter for your clothes now?' I asked. " 'If you were to write a note we should have no difficulty about the matter."

"I shall have no difficulty," said Mr. Rodewald with a smile, which possibly he considered humorous. "I intend to adopt quite another course with Mr. Milter."

"May I enquire—?"

"I will tell you all about it when I see you again," he answered, putting his pipe in his pocket, and rising to depart. "I must be off now. It is of no use offering me the run of your wardrobe, as I see you are thinking of doing, thank you. I am twice as broad across the chest as you," and Mr. Rodewald, with good-humoured superiority, looked me over.

"You ought to join a volunteer corps," he remarked. "I advise you to think about it. Have you ever done so?"

I said I had not, and that I never intended to think about it; whereupon he laughed, and observed he had no idea I was so touchy.

"By the way," he added, after we had shaken hands and spoken our farewells, "I am going to have my agreement stamped—shall I get yours done at the same time? It will spare you a journey to Somerset House; besides, unless you know your way about that lively place, you may lose half a whole morning looking for the right office."

I knew my way about Somerset House as well as I knew my way about The Snuggery; but it was useless trying to assert oneself before Mr. Rodewald. Meekly I thanked him, and handed over the document in question, feeling at the same time The Snuggery was mine no longer—that it and all it contained had passed into the possession of a master mind.

About an hour after Mr. Rodewald and I parted, he walked up to Mr. Milter's, accompanied by a policeman.

As was his amiable custom, Mr. Milter opened the door in person, and, even in his changed attire, immediately recognised his antagonist of the early morning.

What Mr. Milter might have said to him had he called alone, it is impossible to tell; for the farmer, seeing that the majesty of the law was come likewise to visit him, considered it better to treat the whole affair as a jest, and so said airily, and with a nod intended to be ingratiating,

"You have come for your clothes, I suppose?"

"No, I haven't," retorted Mr. Rodewald, who, as he

subsequently told me, enjoyed the affair immensely. "I have come to see you and a man in your employment called Daniel Byers; is he about?"

Mr. Milter thought he was, and turned to seek his *employé*, but Mr. Rodewald interposed,

"You had better stay with us. You can send for him."

It was not nice. Mr. Milter, one of the greatest bullies in Reedbourne, a man heavy of limb, coarse of speech, slow of thought, and clumsy of movement, felt the effect of Mr. Rodewald's manner, or, as he himself expressed the matter, "considered it awk'ard."

"If he had 'ave come cussin' and swearin' and black-guardin'," said poor Mr. Milter afterwards, "I should a-known what to make of it; but my gentleman, d—— him, was so precious cool and precise, it skeered me like—there, I don't mind saying so—it did."

"I kept my eye on him," explained Mr. Rodewald, subsequently; "and the brute quailed—I assure you I could see him blenching."

"Dan," said Mr. Milter, when that worthy, with a fine odour of the farmyard pervading his clothes, came slouching round, "this gentleman wants a word with you."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Rodewald. "Is your name Daniel Byers?"

"I b'lieve it be, master," answered the man.

"Then I give you in charge for stealing my clothes; and, Mr. Milter, I give you in charge as an accessory also, for receiving property you well knew to be stolen."

There ensued a dead pause; then said Mr. Milter, calling to a maid-servant hovering about the end of the passage,

"Susan, there is a bundle of clothes in the parlour—this good gentleman's clothes—bring them here."

"You had better be careful," interposed the policeman at this juncture; "whatever you say may be used against you."

"I had my joke," answered Mr. Milter, "and I suppose this gentleman now means to have his. He trespassed on my ground, and for a bit of a lark I sent Dan for his clothes."

"You carried your joke too far, Mr. Milter, and I believe the magistrates will agree with me in my opinion. Now, policeman, we must be moving."

"Very well, sir. We have got a fly at the gate, Mr.

Milner; will you go in it, or would you rather drive over in your own phaeton? I want to make things as easy as I can—as easy as the law will let me.”

“You are not in earnest, Denham?” said Mr. Milner. “The gentleman can’t mean it.”

“Don’t I?” exclaimed the gentleman. “We’ll see whether I do or not. I’ll give you a lesson you won’t forget in a hurry.”

“You had better not offer any resistance, sir,” suggested the policeman. “Are you sure, now, you would not rather ride in your phaeton? No, sir, you need not say that. I only want to make things pleasant as possible,” added the man, as Mr. Milner muttered a remark relative to riding in the——.

By the time the procession had got half-way to the gate, Mr. Milner had recovered himself.

“Where d’ye want me to go?” he asked, stopping suddenly.

“Only to Hampfield, sir,” answered Denham. “All I wants is to make things——”

“Is that scum going over too?” interrupted Mr. Milner.

“That ‘scum,’ as you are pleased to style me, *is* going over too,” answered Mr. Rodewald, “but I will sit on the box beside the driver.”

I should like to give the whole of the proceedings before the magistrates as reported *in extenso* in the local papers.

The prosecutor’s account of his misfortunes was received with “peals of laughter,” in which the “bench joined.”

The “prosecutor” disclaimed any vindictive feeling in the matter. All he wanted was to convince Mr. Milner of the error of his ways. He had just taken a house at Reedbourne, and he desired for the future to be able to bathe and walk in peace. He would ask the bench, if in accordance with their ideas of justice, to discharge that “poor man” Daniel Byers, who had acted in ignorance, and under the orders of his employer; and as regarded Mr. Milner himself, why, if he would apologise, and give a nominal sum, say five pounds, to the County Hospital, he, Mr. Rodewald, was willing, if once again the bench approved, to let “bygones be bygones.”

After some consultation the bench decided to settle the case on those terms; and everybody agreed Mr. Milner

might consider himself very lucky in getting off so easily, except Mr. Milter himself, who would sooner have parted with one of his eye-teeth than with even a sovereign.

"I'd like to ha' given them, one and all, a piece of my mind," he said, making his way into the hall of the court, when a touch detained him.

"Beg pardon, sir," remarked the person who had laid a hand on his arm, "but you must pay the fine and—costs."

"But I hain't got five pound nor five shilling with me," expostulated Mr. Milter.

"Then you'll have to wait here till you get it," was the reply.

"I'd offer to lend you the amount," gaily remarked Mr. Rodewald, who came up at that moment; "but, like you, I have not five shillings about me."

The words Mr. Milter spoke in answer I refrain from recording. The local papers indicated what occurred by letters and dashes intelligible to the initiated, supplementing their account of the case with a paragraph headed "Exciting Scene Outside the Court," which paragraph finished with the statement that, through the instrumentality of a friendly "collector of taxes," the defendant was at length extricated from a position of much embarrassment.

"Altogether," wrote Mr. Rodewald to me after a few days, "I consider I came off with flying colours. Reedbourne ought to be greatly obliged to me for cutting Mr. Milter's comb. Curious, is it not, that the very first visit I ever paid to the place should prove so remarkable? I assure you the affair created quite a sensation at Hampfield."

"Yes," remarked Mr. Smith, who was with me when I received the letter, "and that is what he wanted. He has set his heart upon compelling the people here to notice him, and he imagines this will prove one step towards his object."

"Well," I said, "if I were in the habit of betting, I should not mind risking a good round sum upon the certainty that the Reedbournians will never have anything to do with Mr. Rodewald."

"And I," answered Mr. Smith, "if I had the money, would be quite willing to stake ten to one in hundreds that, before two years are over, Mr. Rodewald will, in your pretty village, have the ball at his foot."

CHAPTER XIII.

REEDBOURNE.

IN the valley of the Thames it was the pleasantest time of all the year.

Spring had come once again. About the pinewoods there hung that delicious scent which is noticeable only when the sap is rising. When the leaves are falling in the low grounds sheltered from the storms, the odour of the pines seems faint and sodden and death-like; but in the days that cheer us once the year has turned, the fragrance which fills the air is fresh and pleasant, pungent in the nostrils, grateful to the lungs, more invigorating than tonics, sweeter than cunningly-extracted essences.

Down in Surrey, spring is the paradise season to all who love Nature—to whom there is a subtle joy in the budding wild flowers, in the tender green of the larch, in the reeds tardily raising their heads by the margins of softly stealing streams.

Where else shall one find such wealth of colour, such variety of tint? Where beside, in England, does the blue vault of heaven seem so limitless as over that lovely plain? The meads, so recently covered with water, are now aglow with flowers; in the deep grassy dells, beside the canals, buds and blossoms bloom in loneliness and beauty.

What charm is there those streams so slowly wandering lack? In what of loveliness are their green banks wanting?

Soon the lilies and the king-cobs will be floating on the surface of the water, and the colours of the flowers will be deeper and richer, and the perfumes heavier and more defined; but in the spring, before the hawthorn is in bloom, or meadowsweet can be gathered near spots where the grass grows rank, and there is moisture under foot, each scent and each flower is delicate and fragile. The fragrance, though all-pervading, is so slight as to defy recognition; and the tints of the peeping flowers, of the shy spring blossoms, are as changing as the glancing colours on a dove's neck—as impossible to describe as an

effect of light on the sea, as the tone of a cloud moving softly yet swiftly over a distant hill.

There is nothing joyous about that land. It is beautiful, but not gay. In it there is as little element of laughter as of tragedy. No dancing rivulets, no leaping waters, no savage fastnesses, no haunts where the spirit of desolation might be supposed to brood. "Pensive" is perhaps the word which rightly describes the character of the scenery; for it is the only strong feeling left upon the mind of the lover of Nature who wanders through that valley lying so near to London, and yet so little known to Londoners.

Of all the villages which lie scattered through that part of Surrey—some nestling under hills, low and covered with goodly trees; some sheltering in the lee of pine woods; some giving upon wide tracts of moorland, glorious with the purple heather and the golden gorse; some all surrounded by stately domains, or set in the midst of fruitful farms—there is none perhaps so favoured in position as Reedbourne.

Round and about it are clustered the beauties other hamlets possess separately.

In the distance, far away, are blue swelling hills merging almost in cloud-line; whilst nearer at hand there are rising grounds planted from base to summit with elms and oaks, with graceful birch and trembling linden, with ash-trees hanging out their keys, and Spanish chesnuts that in the season scatter down an inexhaustible wealth of fruit for little hands to gather. Placed where green meadows slope gently to the Reed, it stands amid a labyrinth of waters, for there are many streams winding in and out through copse and mead and fallow—streams which are in no haste to seek the sea, but loiter on their way, and make channels for themselves as devious and fantastic as the paths tracked by children's footsteps at play. Look where you will, there is water; go where you please, there is greenery. When the sun blazes down into the valley, as I think it blazes nowhere in England—when the heat is unendurable, and the breath of the south wind is as the blast from a hot-air furnace—the grass remains unscorched, the tender blade keeps moist and fresh; under the unsheltered expanse of a cloudless sky the fields preserve their tint of emerald, and the turf rises elastic after a foot has pressed it, by reason of the *white mists that lie over the water-meadows in the fine*

warm nights, making the earth under the moonlight look like a filmy sea.

It was still the spring-time, and on Sundays and Saturday afternoons Mr. Rodewald walked about Reedbourne; acknowledging it was a very lovely village, but feeling that it had never been quite so beautiful until he sought it for a residence.

And yet in his heart Mr. Rodewald was disappointed. Reedbourne had not greeted him with effusion. Indeed, it was no use disguising the fact that Reedbourne remained absolutely indifferent to his presence; that whilst he was quite welcome to stay, he was equally welcome to go away; that literally it did not signify to Reedbourne whether Mr. Rodewald or Mr. Cheverley or Mr. Turtle lived at The Snuggery.

It seems incredible, but it is true, that away in the Thames valley Mr. Rodewald felt himself of less importance than in that upper part of a house, unfurnished, near Goswell Road, which for many struggling years he occupied.

There he had been "greatly respected," as a vague phrase expresses a vaguer sentiment. His landlord, who used the ground-floor of the premises for business purposes, approved a tenant who paid his rent on the instant, and executed his own repairs; the baker had a respectful word for him as he stood airing himself on his doorstep about the time Mr. Rodewald passed to his accustomed omnibus; whilst the butcher, sharpening his knife with a bloodthirsty dexterity, said, when his customer crossed his threshold,

"I have *the very* joint you want, sir. Look here, sir, is not that a picture? Never had a finer bit o' beef in my shop, and that you'll say when you cuts into it."

There he was known to the parish beadle, and though he paid no rates, was always courteously addressed by the collectors of various taxes, by the beadle, by the clerk of the church he attended—nay, even by the clergyman (non-resident) himself.

When Mr. Rodewald rented The Snuggery, he almost unconsciously worked out a little rule-of-three sum, with the result that he would know and be known at Reedbourne; that acting in a different manner from Mr. Cheverley, and being quite a different sort of person altogether, he would at once take up a position in the neighbourhood, form

acquaintances, and eventually become a man sought after and esteemed.

Regarding Reedbourne simply as a little country village, he fell into the mistake of regarding it as remote from London, and expected to become immediately an object of as great interest to its inhabitants as might have been the case had the hamlet lain in the most distant corner of Cornwall.

Though he failed to express the sentiment in words even to himself, there can be little doubt but that he decided to go and conquer.

Paying ready money, he thought he would be an object of interest to the shopkeepers; perfectly aware of his own abilities, he decided that when people knew what he was, they would be only too glad to welcome his appearance at The Snuggery. Further, judging his residence simply from London experiences of rent and habitation, he considered Mr. Cheverley's little cottage a very fine place indeed, a place to which you might "ask anybody," he decided. At that period, asking, with Mr. Rodewald, meant having. In the upper part of the house near Goswell Road, he had never requested the company of any one who was not delighted to accept his cordial invitation, but then the cockney in town and the cockney out of town are two very different persons; and Mr. Rodewald forgot, if indeed he ever knew, that the kingdom of Cockaigne now extends for at least twenty miles in all directions from the Royal Exchange.

Driven away from the once familiar music, the descendants of those who passed their days and nights under the shadow of the dragon and the grasshopper, have betaken themselves to town houses built amongst the pleasant fields; and forgetful of the shops and the warehouses and the factories in which the wherewithal to live is made, set up for great folks who can afford, and have reason, Jones to despise Robinson, and Robinson, Smith.

To all social intents and purposes, Reedbourne was as much a London suburb as Forest Hill or Hampstead—which, indeed, seeing her fair and smiling and innocent-looking, was extremely difficult to realise.

Notwithstanding her beauty, Reedbourne was mercenary, exceedingly. In her own person she united the sins of

London and the sins of a fashionable watering-place. Not an atom of rustic simplicity about her, I warrant you. Spite of her gleaming waters and sunlight glancing across her fields, and banks covered with wild flowers and wealth of loveliness, and apparent ingenuousness, Reedbourne was a very harpy.

There had been a time, before Londoners discovered how exceedingly beautiful she was—with a tender, pensive, wistful sort of beauty specially grateful to the eyes and minds of men tossed all day by the tempestuous waves of business—when Reedbourne, if dull, was innocent; but that period was all past and done with.

Though still dull—the mind of any one accustomed to a different sort of charmer can scarcely conceive *how* dull—Reedbourne was no longer innocent.

For the humble householder, who, with a laudable fear of debt before his eyes, limited the weekly expenditure, and carefully totted up the tradesmen's bills, Reedbourne entertained a lofty contempt. Very poor folk she tolerated, since they were useful, indeed necessary, to the rich people she affected; but the residents dear to her heart were persons who had no need to look after pennies, and who scattered money abroad with a lavish hand.

It was for this reason she looked with favour upon those "families" who came down for the summer, renting mansions and villas and cottages furnished—paying more rent, indeed, for a few months' occupation than the legitimate tenants did for all the year.

For them she killed her fatted calves, and selected her plumpest capons; on them she waited hand and foot; to secure their custom she worked as she never worked at any other period of her life. A stranger and a pilgrim, who took up his temporary abode within her borders, could get anything Reedbourne was able to compass for his delectation; but habitual residents, unless they had very long purses indeed, and felt willing to open them wide, were apt to be treated with neglect, if not contumely.

From lethargy Reedbourne was wont to awake a little before Easter; then were houses set in order, and agents became expectant; cooks, always scarce, could command their own prices, and maids-of-all-work at once rose to a premium.

In a word, fair Reedbourne loved money: if too well, wisely! and, given that it were spent in and upon her, was apt not to inquire curiously whence the golden shower fell. Not merely did she welcome with effusion visitors who came for the season, but she had also kindly looks and friendly offices for those who, in their time of prosperity, chose to rent one of the "big houses," and lightly spend wealth easily got, as it might seem at the time, but for which some day a terrible price would be exacted.

More than one man, whose salary in London did not exceed three hundred a year, selected Reedbourne as a fitting place in which to expend his thousands.

Individuals who have since become justly celebrated had at that Reedbourne achieved celebrity of another sort before figuring upon the boards of the Old Bailey. Nice liberal gentlemen one and all, no mean scrutiny of tradesman's bills, no complaining of the price of this, that, and the other with them! Sixpences were not scarce in *their* pockets; right royally they flung shillings to porters, and crowns to boatmen. In the time of their prosperity, Reedbourne bowed down and worshipped, and basked in their sunshine till the darkness came and enshrouded them.

And when they disappeared, fugitives or convicted criminals, Reedbourne thought of them without shame and without sorrow. They were gone, but the money they had spent remained. There stood the new schools, opened with a flourish of trumpets, and liberally contributed to by one; there was a painted window in the old church, presented by another; there glittered the new clock given by a third benefactor who had exchanged the quiet of Reedbourne for the graceful seclusion of Portland.

Why multiply examples? For some reason the valley of the Thames has always been a favourite resort of gentlemen clever enough to supply their own wants out of the pockets of other people. It is a nice level country through which to drive horses bought and kept and groomed at the expense of confiding shareholders. The rivers are exceedingly pleasant for water-parties provisioned on the same basis. There are lovely houses to be rented by any one able to get somebody else to pay for them; and there are pleasant walks where individuals, *wearied with cooking accounts*, and exhausted *with the wear and tear even of successful swindling*, may

recruit their energies and devise fresh plans for keeping the ball moving a little longer and yet a little still.

In such a place the regular expenditure and the honest moderation which had, in a long course of years, won the approval of metropolitan butcher, baker, local authorities, and parochial dignitaries, were naturally little appreciated.

Mr. Rodewald, feeling assured he was clever, and knowing he paid his way with a punctuality worthy of all praise, thought Reedbourne would consider him an acquisition, and, when once his many admirable qualities came to be understood, adopt him with open arms; whereas Reedbourne was absolutely indifferent to the cleverness of anybody, and required another virtue added to ready cash, namely, plenty of it, and an absolute indifference as to the actual value received in exchange.

For all the notice Reedbourne took of him, Mr. Rodewald might have been an Easter or Whitsuntide excursionist down for a day; only in that case he must have failed to procure even a cup of tea, since Reedbourne gave no "greeting to holiday Londoners," setting a stern face indeed against their encroachments, and resolutely refusing to provide them with food or entertainment or rest, or anything except very inferior drink.

On festive occasions—except the very few Reedbourne chose to ordain for its own inhabitants—the luckless stranger who strayed that way might have imagined he was in a village of the dead.

The shopkeepers put up their shutters, and the residents stayed within doors. There was not even a drop of water to be had, unless a pedestrian chose to drink out of the horse-troughs, or, ignorant that the rivers were common sewers, adventure to quench his thirst by quaffing from some placid stream. The train service was as that of Sundays, and a general depression prevailed.

Concerning that little victory over Milter, Mr. Rodewald might, for all the good which accrued, as well never have gained it.

He did not even achieve notoriety. Nobody cared about the right of way. Nobody wanted to bathe in the Reed except boys, who were perfectly indifferent upon which side they took their dip, and, indeed, who regarded Mr. Milter's denunciations as rather good fun.

Beyond all, nobody cared who occupied The Snuggery. So far as Reedbourne was concerned, it might have remained empty for ever. The man who lived there was welcome to live in it as the men who had lived there before. Reedbourne made no objection to his presence. On the whole, however, opposition would have been more agreeable to Mr. Rodewald than toleration. This absolute indifference was wonderfully trying to a man who hoped not merely to make his mark, but to make it at once; and one consequence of Reedbourne's persistent blindness to his merits was that Mr. Rodewald's soul waxed hot within him, and his tongue on occasion grew exceeding bitter concerning the village and its inhabitants.

A long dreary winter, with the water out a good deal in every direction, had not tended to improve his opinion of the neighbourhood.

After all, it was cold work, and mostly wet work, walking to and from the station; and Mr. Rodewald, often as he walked in the dark misty mornings over sloppy roads—in which his feet sunk and left perfect impressions of his boots—marvelled at his own folly in having forsaken his cosy home in London, conveniently near his business, for a cottage two miles from a station situated in a district unilluminated by gas, uncheered by society.

If in the summer days there is in that land a heat which, to be conceived, has to be experienced, so in the winter nights there is a darkness which may be felt; and it was no treat to a man, after working hard in London for long business hours, to travel down the South Western line in a cold, dirty, draughty, carpetless, and American cloth-covered seat second-class carriage, and to make the best of his way home through slushy snow, or grope it amidst the Cimmerian blackness of some of the Reedbourne evenings.

But with the spring-weather, Mr. Rodewald's chilled heart warmed and expanded, like the leaves and flowers. There was something to be said in favour of the country; by degrees the waters retired into their natural channels, and the emerald meadows smiled in the sunshine. As he walked to the train, Mr. Rodewald now paused to listen to the jubilant songs of the larks. Every hedgerow and every tree was a "*mist of green*;" under the elms, and on every bank, *primroses budded, violets scented the coppices.* As

I have said, the pleasantest time of all the year in Surrey had come, and Easter, late that season, was at hand.

"You will run down on Thursday and stay till Wednesday, won't you?" said Mr. Rodewald to Mr. Smith, with a friendly warmth.

There was no other person to whom he could quite unburden his mind on the subject of Reedbourne; and the tie, which bound him to the man whose worldly intelligence he despised, had tightened considerably in the months since Mr. Cheverley left The Snuggery.

"Thank you, I can't do that," answered Mr. Smith.

"Well, what can you do? in a word, how long will you give us?"

"I will go to you on Saturday night, and remain till Tuesday morning."

"Settled!" exclaimed Mr. Rodewald; and the two shook hands upon the arrangements as they were never likely to do upon a bargain.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. RODEWALD IN CHURCH.

A LOVELY morning, fresh with the freshness of spring, warm with the warmth of summer, all the world and his wife thinking about making holiday; even Reedbourne dressed in all its best to go to church and chapel in the morning, and take long and almost silent walks with its sweethearts beside the streams and across the meadows in the afternoon.

A magnificent Easter morning! No fear of rain spotting the new bonnets and spoiling the new dresses, to be worn for the first time that day. The drapers round and about Reedbourne had, during the few last weeks of Lent, done a very good trade; and it is to be feared there was more discussion, among the female inhabitants, of prints and stuffs, and flowers and feathers and laces, than of doctrine; more thought of the vagaries of fashion than of the meaning of texts.

It being a neighbourhood, however, where there is much uplifting of the voice in melody, a stranger might well have

been surprised (and deceived) by hearing in all directions, for days previously, the lilting of Easter hymns.

After the sad harmonies of six rueful Sundays, to say nothing of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, Reedbourne looked forward with chastened delight to songs of rejoicing; and in almost every cottage human pipes were tuning up, rehearsing for the deafening psalm tunes, "which, in church and in chapel, and at the open-air preachings," were sure to be sung.

"If one knew no better," thought Mr. Smith, as he sauntered leisurely through the village on that Saturday evening when he was due at The Snuggery, "what a primitive, unsophisticated, moral, and religious region one might imagine this to be! And to think of the language I have heard here, proceeding, too, out of the mouths of very babes and sucklings!"

But let him criticise as he would, let him affect to depreciate the peaceful landscape as he might, most undoubtedly those visits to Reedbourne were the brightest spots in his work-a-day life.

From the moment he left the railway-station and emerged upon the heath, from the moment the fresh country air saluted his nostrils, bearing with it the pungent smell of the pine-woods, and the mingled scents of leaf and flower and shrub, a certain peace seemed to fall upon his heart.

The fever which had long troubled him was not abated; but as Nature laid a soothing hand upon his forehead, the pain grew easier for the moment.

Some day, she seemed to whisper, there would arrive an end, there would come a rest. Under the greensward, if never above it, in some quiet spot amid the daisies and the buttercups, he would sleep quite peacefully; so soundly that no anxiety should have power to wake him, so dreamlessly that the past should never recur in the watches of the longest night, so deeply that he should be insensible to joy as to sorrow, and be thrilled as little by the soaring lark's song as disturbed by the memories of a wrecked and wasted life.

Had it not been for Mr. Rodewald's presence, his visits to The Snuggery would *probably* have been as happy as visits could be to him. *He sometimes ungratefully enough so considered; and yet possibly his host's conversation, and*

his host altogether, infused the drop of bitter and the atom of amusement to the social salad which rendered the otherwise tasteless elements palatable to the man who had never, in his best days, particularly relished mental food for babes.

Moreover, in Mr. Rodewald's family circle he was thoroughly at home. He was the friend of the house, he could wander through it just as he pleased, he had never to don either company clothes or company manners; there was a "slipped ease" about the place grateful to one who had long cast off most of the restraints of society. It was home in the best sense of the word, in its absence of pretension, in its comfort and cleanliness and modest plenty, in the thorough hospitality of the man who provided for his household, in the kindness of the woman who looked after all domestic details, in the quiet affection the two children felt for him, in the plentiful fare spread without fuss and without affectation, in the blazing fires of winter, in the flower-decked rooms of spring—little if taken singly, perhaps, but in the aggregate much to a solitary man, who had ever yearned for a home, and never found one of his own.

It was the morning of Easter-day, of as lovely an Easter-day as ever dawned.

In the grate some billets of wood were blazing, but the window was set wide; and in the soft light wind the muslin curtains, white as snow, and freshly put up, waved gently with a not unpleasing rhythm. The breakfast-table was spread with that abundance, and yet simplicity, which characterised every meal in Mr. Rodewald's establishment.

"I would rather pay for food than for medicine," he was won't to explain; and who shall dispute the wisdom of his choice?

In that house a person might be quite certain everything set before him was the best of its sort procurable.

Fierce had been the battles waged between Mr. Rodewald and the local tradespeople before he could bend their practice to his determination.

The united testimonies of all the chemists in England *could not* have persuaded Mr. Rodewald that an adulterated article was pure.

"My good friend," he said to one irate individual, "I

have a nose and I have a palate : that is to say, I can smell and I can taste ; and I both smell and taste that your cheese is vile and your bacon rank. If, therefore, you are not able, or do not choose, to send me what I want, I must get it elsewhere. In justice to himself, a man who pays ready money should always purchase the best article for the lowest price."

Judge how the local tradespeople loved a man possessed of this mind, a man who, keeping his own cows, could set even the proprietor of the Reedbourne Dairy at defiance !

"Ay, and they make their own bread too !" said that individual to the aggrieved cheesemonger, "and nice stuff I'm told it is ; but then they are foreigners, and they sort 'll eat any muck."

Which was true in no sense. Mr. Rodewald, in many respects, was more English than the English ; whilst his sister-in-law, Miss Lydney, had spent all the best years of her life in a farmhouse away down in Devonshire, and could have given her neighbours in Reedbourne, with advantage, many a lesson in domestic management and economy.

Around the breakfast-table sat five persons, viz., Miss Lydney, two girls, aged respectively twelve and thirteen, Mr. Smith, and Mr. Rodewald.

In his Sunday suit Mr. Smith looked plainer and older than he had done in evening dress, or in the pepper-and-salt attire he ordinarily wore. The frock-coat was of an old-fashioned cut ; the trousers showed the creases of indifferent folding ; the dark vest, so closely buttoned as only to show an inch of shirt-front, gave an additional sadness to his appearance, which presented in every respect a contrast to Mr. Rodewald's bright vivacity.

The latter was indeed a man who thoroughly enjoyed the sunshine of that Easter morning, troubled with no inconvenient memories, given to no sorrowful retrospection ; a man who, if not quite at peace with the world, was thoroughly at peace with himself, and who honestly believed that if the Almighty had only created all human beings after one pattern, and that pattern like Rodewald, everything *would have gone on safely and smoothly, the little matter of Eve notwithstanding*.

"Going to church this morning?" said Mr. Rodewald, addressing his guest.

"I am at your disposal. I will go if you like."

"Well, then, I do like. When you are alone in those dismal chambers of yours, I am afraid you never attend divine service."

Mr. Smith looked at Miss Lydney and smiled.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you know I never contradict you."

"That is cool, at any rate," remarked Mr. Rodewald, reddening a little; "and you, Mary, what are you going to do?"

Miss Lydney laughed outright.

"Just what I always do," she answered. "Stay at home and see to the dinner. Shall you take the children?"

For a moment Mr. Rodewald's face clouded.

"I don't think we can this morning, Mary; you see there is no getting seats in that confounded church, and it is so awkward standing about—and——"

"Besides, they are going with me this afternoon to Thamesford," broke in Mr. Smith. "Service there does not commence until half-past three, and we can sit where we like—either in the squire's pew or in the organ-loft. The rector, I am quite sure, will be delighted to see us; at least I know the old woman in a poke bonnet and printed cotton shawl, who officiates as verger, seems always charmed to see me!"

"And you are to tell us stories all the way," declared Susan.

"No, you are to tell me stories," was the reply. "Why you have had nothing to do the whole winter except make up tales."

"We have been reading such a pretty book," said the elder girl; "I wonder if you know it?" and she brought a limply-bound little volume from her pocket and handed it to her friend.

"Yes, I know it, Annie," he answered, turning over the leaves.

"Was it not strange how Providence gave widow White all she wanted?" asked Susan.

"Yes, Susie, and didn't the widow White go on wanting!" commented Mr. Smith, as he closed the book.

"What is it all about?" inquired Mr. Rodewald.

"It is the story," said Mr. Smith, gravely, "of a lady left in straitened circumstances, and, of course, with a large family, who, upon a very slender income, managed to do some very wonderful things. It is a story of struggle and success, or rather, I should say, a narrative of believing and receiving. It is the old tale of wishing and having, only presented in a different shape."

"I wish Providence would give me what I want," said Susan, addressing no person in particular, and it was noticeable that no one asked her what the especial boon she desired might be.

On the contrary, Mr. Rodewald, pushing back his chair, remarked, "It is time we were getting ready, Smith," and hustled out of the room, while Miss Lydney began to clear the table of plates, and cups and saucers, and bore away a tray full, negating Mr. Smith's offers of assistance.

Annie, carrying coffee-pot and cream-ewer, followed her aunt.

Up to the window, beside which Mr. Smith stood looking out into the garden, came Susie; and as she crossed the room, even a stranger might have told the petition it was most likely she had in her mind.

Resting upon her crutch, she touched Mr. Smith's hand gently.

"You knew," she said, softly, "what I meant?"

"Yes, Susie, I knew," he answered, sitting down, and putting his arm tenderly round the patient little figure.

"When I read books like that, it seems hard, Mr. Smith. If other people can get things they want, why can't I?"

"My dear little girl," he answered, "other people cannot get what they want."

"Then you do not believe that book is true?"

"I do not, indeed, Susie. It would, as you say, be very hard if it were."

"But people do get what they want, Mr. Smith."

"All the things?"

"Widow White did."

"Widow White was an exception to all rules; we will put her on one side. I would rather talk about you, Susie. You have got your burden to bear, and it seems terrible to you;

but would it seem less grievous to you if others had to bear one like it?"

"I don't know. I don't think so, when I come *really* to think; you understand, Mr. Smith. It would grieve me terribly if you and papa, and auntie and Annie, were lame—and O, fancy what it would be if nobody could walk, except with a crutch! That is not what I mean at all. I do not want other people to be ill. I only want to be well myself."

"Exactly, my dear; and that is what we all want. Almost every one—I might, indeed, say every one—has some burden he desires to be rid of, or some good he would fain possess."

"But you, Mr. Smith, what can there be that you have not?"

She was sitting on his knee by this time, and had both arms clasped round his neck.

"Ah! what indeed?" he said, gaily. "I am a mighty prosperous sort of individual; and yet, do you know, Susie, I have just a little tiny parcel of care, just what I can easily carry about with me, tied up in brown paper, that I would give all the world to be rid of; that is as grievous to me, and as constant to me as this"—and he touched her crutch—"is to you. So cheer up, little one; who can tell? perhaps some day we may, both of us, get our desires, like your friend widow White."

She did not answer—she did not seem quite satisfied. Wistfully the blue eyes looked up with a longing questioning to the bluer sky.

"It is all a mystery, Susie," he went on, "one you and I and thousands more will never solve here. All we—you and I and the thousands—can do is to strive for faith—not like the widow White, that we shall receive the good things we want—but that there is some sound reason why we should not have them. The petition for those who are distressed in mind, body, or estate is a comprehensive one; not a man woman or child in the whole world but stands in need of it some time or other."

"Now, Smith, *are* you coming or are you going to *stay at home*?" inquired Mr. Rodewald, opening the door.

"I am coming," answered Mr. Smith. "Good-bye for

the present, 'Susie ;' and, taking his hat, he hurried after his host.

For a few minutes they paced along side by side in silence ; then Mr. Rodewald said,

"She does not seem to get much better."

"Of her lameness you mean, I suppose?"

"Yes ; I don't see that the country is doing her any good."

"Did you expect it to cure her?"

"Well, you know, it was principally for her sake I removed from London."

"Yes. But you remember the doctors said she could not live if she stayed there. She has picked up wonderfully since she came to Reedbourne."

"That is true," agreed Mr. Rodewald. "Both she and Annie are in thorough good health, thank God ! But now tell me one thing : do you think Susie will ever be able to walk like other people?"

"What does your medical man say?"

"Never mind what he says," was the reply. "I put more trust in your opinion, Smith, than in that of all the faculty."

"Complimentary to the faculty!"

"That is another question. Do you believe she will ever run about as her sister does, for instance?"

"Ask your own common sense," said Mr. Smith, but he did not say it brusquely.

"That tells me she will be lame for life."

"I fear there is little hope for her being otherwise."

"It is terrible," said Mr. Rodewald, "terrible—and the child feels it so ; she seems to be much less contented here than she was in town."

"That will pass away," answered the other. "Naturally she feels the calamity more in the midst of green fields than she did among bricks and mortar. Besides, she is stronger ; and while her increased vitality makes her long to jump and run and dance, she chafes, as a matter of course, against the infirmity which prevents her doing so. The infirmity is nothing new ; but the wish to be skipping and racing and romping is."

"What a misfortune !" exclaimed Mr. Rodewald ; and truly he felt it to be one.

In every way better, stronger, straighter, cleverer than other children ; that is what he desired his girls to grow up ; and yet here, out of only two, he had one who, crippled, not by nature, but by accident, must halt all the days of her life.

"I could not bring her to church with us, of course," he said, after a pause. "The village is so full now, it seems impossible to get a seat early ; and I cannot have all the congregation staring at her poor little crutch till it suits the pleasure of that grim old sexton to find if there is a vacant place."

"What is the system, then, here ?"

"Pews reserved for the parishioners."

"Are not you a parishioner ?"

Mr. Rodewald shrugged his shoulders, and answered :

"The Snuggery has, somehow, I suppose, dropped out of the parish. Cheverley, as you know, was indifferent ; and before his time the place belonged to a rabid Dissenter. There is no making head against such influences. I wrote about sittings, and was informed that there were none vacant, but that the churchwardens 'would endeavour to accommodate me as soon as possible.' I have given my mite to all the local charities, and never allowed the bag to pass without dropping something in ; and yet, in the eight months I have been here, not a visitor has crossed my threshold, except, indeed, the doctor, who has charged pretty stiffly for each call."

"And did you want visitors ?"

"Of course ; does not every one wish for society ?"

"I know one person who does not," answered Mr. Smith.

"And what on earth you, who are seeing people all day long in town, can desire society for in the country, passes my understanding."

"I think you scarcely comprehend," began Mr. Rodewald.

"I comprehend perfectly that, if—to suppose an impossible case—I were to rent The Snuggery, all I should crave from Reedbourne would be to let me alone. I should come down here for quiet, not for gabble—for a retreat from the world, instead of a place where I should have to listen to the petty gossip of a tattling village. That is the beauty of a place like Reedbourne. It is London, and yet it is the country. If one have a taste for solitude, it may

be compassed here almost as well as in New Inn. Why, my dear fellow, what an old-fashioned notion it is that, if one hire a cottage on the borders of town, the clergyman and the doctor and the local attorney are bound to take notice of the fact! We have got rid of the gratuitous visits of attorney and doctor; all we want now is to be sure we need never hear the clergyman speak except in the pulpit."

"What a Goth you are, Smith!"

"Not at all. I only express the feelings of a class. We can many of us tolerate the country, but we are not able to tolerate country people. What are the squabbles of a local board, the peccadilloes of the squire, to us? We cannot get up a sentiment about Miss Rustica's young man, or sympathise with Lady Greathouse when she finds out that her maid is the wickedest foreigner living. A fellow I knew once took a cottage down near Windsor. He was out of health and wanted to recruit. No sooner was he established than the clergyman, in the goodness of his heart, called. My friend felt appalled. 'This sort of thing can't go on, Jack,' he said to me; 'it must be put a stop to.' The fact is, Rodewald," went on Mr. Smith, laying a persuasive hand on his companion's arm, "the clergy are better without us; we might unsettle them. If one's lines lie amongst flannel petticoats and the tippling of charwomen, it is better never to realise the fact of a wider life. Cheverley even—"

"Cheverley! don't talk about him—he was an ass!"

"My dear fellow, Cheverley was not an ass, but he made the same mistake as you have done. He wanted local society, I think; you say you do, and local society is not to be compassed within fifty miles of London, on the borders of the New Forest, perhaps, or beside the Norfolk broads, or possibly now in the very heart of the City—"

"O, confound you, Smith, don't talk such nonsense! There is society, and good society too, to be had everywhere if a man gets fair play!"

"Well, well," said the other, "you know I never contradict you."

"On the contrary, I know you are always contradicting me. It is quite sufficient for me to express an opinion on any subject, for you at once to take up the opposite side of the question."

"That makes a little variety, does not it? We should tire probably of an eternal duet."

"I confess I should like an occasional harmony if only for a change."

"Here we are at the church," remarked Mr. Smith, "and if you do not get harmony you will at least hear plenty of melody there. All the Easter hymns were in full swing as I passed through the village."

"H—sh!" entreated Mr. Rodewald, and stepping into the porch, he took off his hat. "Shall we go into the free seats?" he whispered.

For answer his companion nodded.

The service at Reedbourne was what is called "attractive," and consequently a little High. No bald simplicity about it, you may be sure. Fashionable folks patronised the old gray building; and the powers that ruled the ecclesiastical roast in that fair village did their best to merit a continuance of popular confidence. Long before, the old high pews had been swept away, and as one poor Irish-woman remarked, pathetically, "there was not a 'bit of shelter'" left in the edifice. Even the pulpit was a mere skeleton of a pulpit; and through the trellis-work the preacher's black trousers were plainly revealed beneath his surplice.

Stained windows there were, given by the faithful—some presented by generous donors who felt that liberality was a virtue when money, not their own, became the question. More hideous than can be imagined were most of these works of art; they were terrible; and Mr. Smith was wont to regard them with an appalled fascination, and with a profound sadness of expression which perplexed many a native of Reedbourne. Everything in what the rector loved to call that "beautiful church" was done decently and in order, according to modern lights. Money had not been spared; and there was not a scone or a hassock or a scrap of carpet but what the severest censor of ecclesiastical decoration might have approved. Snowy were the surplices of the choir, devout the obeisances of the smallest sinner who sang his shrill treble.

Beautiful on high festivals were the decorations presided over by the youth and beauty of Reedbourne, and *dismal* enough the Gregorian chants and hymns that *obtained* in the sad seasons of the Church's year.

There was a joke current at Reedbourne about a young fop who, being asked his opinion of the service, said, "It was credible for the provinces;" but this remark could only have been prompted by professional jealousy, since no one could deny that, keeping within the lines of a moderate ritualism, the service was very well done indeed.

As for the sermons, they were, so Mr. Smith declared, generally harmless. If occasionally they struck at any vice, it was always the vice of the lower orders; and as the lower orders did not, as a rule, attend church, no susceptibilities were hurt.

The most noticeable feature about religion at Reedbourne was its gentility. No allusion in it, you may be sure, to that trifling difficulty in connection with the eye of a camel—no tilting against sin in high places. Everything went pleasantly as a marriage-bell; and if there were one thing the listener ought to have been more sure of than another, it was concerning the blessedness and safety of riches.

If you broke the Sabbath in a carriage and pair, nobody had any objection to make. If you wanted to get drunk, it was only necessary to compass your wishes upon champagne.

As for that shambling beer-besotted sinner waiting round the corner for the public-house to open, pah! there will be considerable trouble for him in the next world, but Dives need be under no apprehension.

"It is comfortable for the purple-and-fine-linen people," Mr. Smith once remarked; "but it does seem a trifle hard that, because a man is damned in this world, he must be doubly damned in the next."

On that Easter morning Reedbourne had put out its strength.

"Religion never was designed," says the hymn, "to make our pleasures less," and undoubtedly so the ladies felt.

"When one can put on religion in the shape of a new bonnet, and hear holy utterances in the swish-swish of a shimmering silk dress, one has very nearly solved the problem of 'How to make the best of both worlds.'" This reflection was uttered by Mr. Rodewald as he walked home after service; but then he was not on the best terms with man or woman kind at the moment.

"The smell of the flowers makes me ill!" he proceeded; which was singular, for the odours emanating from those innocent blossoms were of the most delicate kind; and when he entered the church, Mr. Rodewald had bestowed approving glances at the font, set about with arum lilies and waxen camellias and pale azaleas, and at the banks of primroses piled upon the window ledges.

He had shot a telling look at his companion, as who should say,

"We spare no trouble or expense down in this, my valley;" but Mr. Smith seemed unimpressed by the display.

As usual his eyes turned towards the painted designs, the fearful and wonderful embodiments of which never seemed to pall upon his sight.

It was the custom at Reedbourne to celebrate high festivals with a processional hymn, the members of the choir and the clergy making, in fine weather, a journey from the vestry to the west door, and thence round the aisles to the chancel. The smallest boys—imps of Satan when off duty, but looking like very angels in their white robes—led the van, and from them the musical company graduated up to burly fellows with huge beards and deep voices, who paced in front of the rector and curate, all singing as they passed along.

To do honour to the motley band, or to some abstract idea the members composing it were presumed to personify, all the individuals in the congregation who possessed reverent minds rose whenever the first chorister appeared; and remained standing till the young cherub folded his wings and sank on his knees in the chancel; and as it had ever been a principle of Mr. Rodewald to "do in Turkey as the Turks do," he followed the example of the multitude, and incited Mr. Smith to imitate his lead.

On came the singers, very slowly, very solemnly making very good music indeed; but it was not the clear trebles or the piping altos or the tuneful tenors which caused Mr. Rodewald to look so suddenly and eagerly at the procession.

Amongst the men he beheld a face he recognised; clad in white he saw a figure he certainly never expected to look upon taking a prominent part in any religious ceremony.

A self-asserting man this deep-voiced bass ; a man who must have drawn attention to himself in any place, in any company ; a man bold-looking and no longer young, yet handsome after a certain common fashion—a man who had made his own way, of that there could be no question ; who seemed prosperous and well fed, and rich and sleek and content, and who walked with a certain bullying swagger, evidently feeling that *he* was the procession, and that all music worth hearing issued from *his* throat.

He came on, on, singing loudly and not over melodiously, and then in a moment he stopped so suddenly that Mr. Smith glanced at his neighbour to see if he too was struck by the phenomenon.

But Mr. Rodewald was not looking at Mr. Smith. He kept his gaze fixed upon the advancing figure, like the Ancient Mariner, literally holding him with his eye. When the procession had passed he smiled and resumed his seat as if satisfied.

"Did you notice a big bumptious-looking fellow, with a voice like a bull, amongst the choir?" he asked Mr. Smith when they were out of the churchyard and wending their way home.

"Yes, who is he?"

"Frank Field. De Field he calls himself down here. He lives in that large house on the second green. He has been in town all winter, and only came back into residence here last week. That is Saul amongst the prophets with a vengeance. He is a wolf I certainly did not expect to see in sheep's clothing."

"What shut him up in such a hurry?"

"I did!" answered Mr. Rodewald.

"How?"

"*I winked at him!*" was the calm rejoinder.

CHAPTER XV.

PREACHERS AND HEARERS

It was evening, and in the study at The Snuggery Mr. Rodewald and his guest sat, between the lights, smoking.

They were almost alone in the house. Miss Lydney and her elder niece were gone to evening service. Susan was laying the supper-cloth and making a salad, which art she had been taught by her father. By reason of her infirmity she was debarred from doing many things, but those she undertook she did remarkably well. For example, her needlework was simply beyond praise. She had a nice taste for music, and played with a tenderness and accuracy beyond her age. If she made up a bouquet, it was arranged with an artistic feeling of form and colour that made the commonest flowers seem delicate and rare; and the few household tasks she could perform were always executed with a nicety which secured the approval even of such a past mistress of all domestic duties as Miss Lydney.

In that simple establishment no servants were kept. Even had their presence been desired, it must have proved difficult to house even one, and provide a spare bed-chamber. Not merely in matters of diet were Mr. Rodewald's ideas liberal and advanced; makeshifts in sleeping accommodation, rooms ill-ventilated and over-tenanted, he would have none of them. The arrangements which had contented, and indeed pleased, Mrs. Turtle would to him have been intolerable; and for this reason, if for none other, a resident domestic at The Snuggery was an impossibility. But there were other reasons. Practically Miss Lydney had ever been her brother-in-law's working housekeeper, and not a little of the prosperity which cheered his path originated with her admirable management and splendid economy. When they were comparatively poor, she had delighted in putting her shoulder to the wheel; and now they were comparatively rich, the whole system had become such second nature that a servant would have inconvenienced Miss Lydney as much as a request for one would have astounded Mr. Rodewald.

For the rough work, for the scrubbing and scouring, the blackleading and washing up, Miss Lydney had now, as formerly, a "person in." Each day Mrs. Brooker's niece came across from her father's house; to what she called "*do*" for the family at The Snuggery. According to her *own statement*, there was nothing on earth in the way of *household work* she was unable to perform. Indeed, in

turn she had undertaken the duties of cook, housemaid, nurse, and general servant, and proved signally unsuccessful in all.

Miss Lydney's estimate of her powers was somewhat different to her own. "I would not trust her to wash out a kitchen towel unless I saw how it was done," summarised that astute lady; whilst it is only fair to state that the girl's summing up of her employers was equally unfavourable.

"Of all the fidgety old maids I ever did see," she observed to her friends, "that Miss Lydney is the fidgetingest; but there, *he's* worse."

And, indeed, to the Reedbourne mind, which had a lazy and contemplative tendency, induced by living among damp fields and over-much standing by the edge of slowly-running streams, Miss Lydney's housewifely activity must have savoured of the horrible.

No cobweb, no speck of dust, no unswept corner, no unscrubbed shelf escaped her Argus eyes. All her life had been devoted to cleanliness; and she could no more have existed amid the chaos wherein Mrs. Turtle dwelt contented than she could with any comfort have eaten a meal prepared under that lady's auspices.

"If all furriners is like them," observed Mrs. Brooker's niece, "their country must be a queer place."

The average Reedbourne mind utterly failed to dissociate Miss Lydney's nationality from that of her brother-in-law, and entertained, moreover, a firm belief that all foreigners were of the same nationality.

But to the ideas of Reedbourne on all subjects Miss Lydney was indifferent. Her world was even narrower than that of the inhabitants of the village in which she found herself. Wherever Mr. Rodewald and the children chanced to be, seemed the world to her. Years before she had set up her household gods, and, in spite of all changes and chances, she worshipped them still.

When Mr. Rodewald, in search of health, went quite by accident to a farmhouse in North Devon, Miss Lydney, three years his senior, was superintending her stepfather's *ménage*?

During the course of that golden summer Mr. Rodewald took walks in the company of Susan Mumford. For the

first time, perhaps, he fell deeply and truly in love. Her beauty, her simplicity, her helplessness, all alike appealed to the best side of the man's nature ; and when he asked her father for her, and obtained his consent to the marriage, no happier man could have been found in the length and breadth of the county.

Without much delay he took home his wife, counting, perhaps, a little on the pecuniary assistance he had a right to expect from a man considered in his station well-to-do.

But the help never came. Before the first child was born Mr. Mumford was dead, and the investigation of his affairs proved he had long been insolvent.

It was then Miss Lydney came to London, at first upon a visit, till she could arrange her future plans ; but during that visit she made herself so necessary that it never came to an end.

Always delicate, Mrs. Rodewald faded away in the uncongenial London atmosphere ; until at length, about three months after the birth of her second daughter, she faded out of life altogether.

At this junction Mr. Rodewald found his sister-in-law's help even more valuable than heretofore. Left with two motherless babies, what could he have done without the assistance of this unsalaried housekeeper, who simply gave herself up body and soul to the new duties which devolved upon her ?

It was she who kept the poor little child, injured by a fall from the arms of a careless nurse, alive after the doctors had said the infant could not live more than a few days ; she who kept down the weekly bills and provided the modest home comforts ; who watched the children in illness and tended them in health ; who mended and managed as the poor dead woman never could have done, the woman who died in good time before her husband realised the mistake he had made, and understood what a wretched business life must have proved had she lived. As it was, he idolised the dead wife whose nature he had never known, cherished her memory, thought tenderly of her, honestly believed she was the sweetest and most charming creature *that ever lived*, and utterly failed to comprehend how *admirable a thing* she had done for him and herself when

she went quietly out of the world, smiling a little in her death sleep.

As for Miss Lydney, he took all she did perhaps rather too much as a matter of course. That she was very good, he acknowledged—that she was a most admirable manager, he knew ; but how good and how admirable Miss Lydney really could be, other people understood possibly better than the man who reaped the advantage of her devoted unselfishness.

Mr. Rodewald's view of the matter was that, while she made him very comfortable, he provided her with a remarkably good home ; but in this, as in most other things, he had managed to get what Mr. Smith called his shilling's-worth of value for his sixpenny-worth of expenditure.

It was his way.

Sitting in the twilight, smoking, Mr. Rodewald reverted to a matter quite out of his way, and which had vexed him—the spectacle, namely of Frank Field, clothed in spotless white, marching round Reedbourne Church, a saint before his time.

He and Mr. Smith had been talking on other subjects, but this touched him nearly, and he could not refrain from barking back to it.

"That is one of the things which always puzzles me about the Church," he said—"the instruments she makes use of."

"Meaning?" suggested Mr. Smith.

"A fellow like Field going in procession, for instance," answered Mr. Rodewald.

"I don't know about that," observed Mr. Smith. "Judas Iscariot, if you remember, was one of the twelve disciples. No disadvantageous comparison intended to your friend, by the way."

"Pray do not call him a friend of mine," entreated Mr. Rodewald. "I would not be seen speaking to him."

"No?" Mr. Smith put the negative in the form of a query.

"There is not a swindling company—a good dashing swindling company, I mean—established since the Limited Liability Act came in, but Frank Field has had a finger in the pie. That place of his is maintained out of the hard-earned money, the pitiful savings of widows and orphans—"

"I have not the intense sympathy for widows and orphans that some people affect, I must confess," commented Mr. Smith. "When unprotected females take to speculating, of course they elect to run their chance like other people."

"Sometimes, Smith, I wonder whether you are ever in earnest—"

"Do you really? I assure you I am very rarely otherwise."

"Why, you must know it is very hard upon women, who have perhaps been toiling all their lives, to lose all they possess in some mushroom company."

"I daresay it is; but if poor women like to entrust their small possessions to the keeping of total strangers, without the smallest security, or, so far as I can see, the slightest inducement except the promise of big interest, what better fate can they expect? Besides, why should Field expect all his eggs to be addled? Naturally he says, there must come chickens out of some of them."

"I don't think so; I believe him to be an unmitigated scoundrel. I am speaking quite dispassionately, you must understand, though he did once do me out of the best thing I ever tried for."

"Really! what was it?"

"O, only a contract. I should have made, I daresay, a good two hundred a year for four years out of it, if Field had not pooh-poohed my offer, and got a creature of his own to put in a tender at a price which really could not have afforded the smallest margin of profit. I suppose they had their pickings in some indirect way. At all events, I don't forget it to Master Field."

"I am quite sure of that," agreed Mr. Smith.

"Not that I would allow any personal feeling to sway my judgment of a man's character."

"Of course not."

"But I don't believe a greater rogue could be found in the City; and that, you will allow, is a broad statement."

"And it may also be perfectly accurate. I know little of the City, and I know less of Mr. Field."

"Then in both respects you may consider yourself very *fortunate*."

"I am quite willing to do so on your authority."

For a few minutes Mr. Rodewald smoked on in silence ; then he said,

"I must confess it tries my faith to see the way such men as Field prosper."

"Does it?" answered Mr. Smith. "I confess I do not see why. I, being such an unlucky wretch, have often in my worst moments derived much comfort from the explicit statement that the wicked only flourish like a green bay-tree. But when I am reasonable, and do not feel sinful, I cannot help fancying that it is a superstition as vain and heathenish as untrue, to suppose those who love God are rewarded with *worldly* blessings. Often it seems to me that in our ideas of religion we are not, Christians though we call ourselves, a bit better than Pagans. What! shall we suppose that to lie soft, to eat of the best, to be clothed in purple, and to be spoken well of by men, are the gifts the Almighty thinks most acceptable to those whose souls He has made immortal? But, pshaw! what nonsense I am talking! Forgive me, Rodewald; I really forgot myself. I have no serious intention of starting a Little Bethel here in opposition to the Bethel presided over by Rivers and Grey."

Mr. Rodewald was silent for a minute; then, by way of making some remark, he said,

"Grey is not half a bad fellow, if he were not such a fool."

"O, you *know* him, do you?"

"Well, I have travelled up and down with him, and we talked a little."

"The weather, the crops, and that sort of thing, I suppose."

"Hang it, Smith, you need not be so satirical!"

"Satirical!" repeated Mr. Smith amazed, and retired to himself.

"Here they are," said Mr. Rodewald, referring to the urn of his sister-in-law and daughter; but Mr. Smith chafed no answer. Lost apparently in reflection, he leaned back in his chair and smoked till it grew too dark for him to see the figure of his companion.

At last then Annie brought in lights, and, going up to her, bade him good-night, Susan following suit.

"Have you had your supper?" asked Mr. Rodewald, looking down the fair hair of his first-born.

"Yes, papa."

"And what did you have?"

"Bread and milk, papa."

"Or rather, bread-and-butter and milk," corrected Susan.

"O, you luxurious children!" exclaimed Mr. Smith.

"But you will have more than bread-and-butter and milk," argued Annie.

"That is the worst of being old," answered Mr. Smith.

"Now, Susie, I am going to carry you upstairs."

"I can get up and down, though, by myself quite well, thank you," she answered; but she let him lift her, nevertheless, giving her crutch to her sister with a little laugh.

"It must be five years since I carried you first," he said.

"I was a very little thing then," she replied, looking back upon that period from the heights of age she had since attained; and then, as he was about to set her down, she added, clinging to him, both arms clasped round his neck:

"I love you, Mr. Smith—O, I do love you!" and as she put her lips to his and kissed him, he understood better than she did why she said this, why her physical lameness and the misfortune which had marred every hope of his life drew them together by some strange chord of sympathy.

"Good-night, good-night," he said, softly, and went back along the passage; but he turned when he reached the head of the stairs, and saw the two children looking after him. They nodded and blew kisses as he waved his hand towards them.

"It is very sweet," he thought; "but O, for the night have been!"

"Supper is ready," said Mr. Rodewald, meeting him in the hall. "Come along, I am as hungry as a hunter."

A cold supper, but a good one. Plenty of everything, and everything the best of its kind.

"Well, Miss Lydney," asked Mr. Smith, "and what did you hear this evening?"

"Mr. Grey preached," she answered; "and I liked his sermon very much indeed."

"This is hopeful," exclaimed Mr. Smith; "what did he tell you?"

"O, he told us what we ought to do, and what we did

not. All he said was very right. He scolded us a good deal ; but I liked it."

"The feminine mind !" ejaculated Mr. Smith, glancing at Mr. Rodewald. "It likes to be scolded by a man."

"When that man is not its husband," amended Mr. Rodewald.

"And, my dear Miss Lydney, what form did his remonstrances on your misconduct assume ?"

"Well, he said we did not kneel when we ought, or stand when we ought, or come to church when we ought."

"And I'll be bound he said we did not give as we ought," added Mr. Rodewald.

"Yes, he did complain about that too ; but what he laid most stress upon was about our not repeating the responses, and not singing, and all that sort of thing."

"Bless the man !" exclaimed Mr. Rodewald. "Does he not think his congregation makes noise enough ? He should sit in the middle of them for a while, and he would pray for silence. I am quite converted to your opinion, Smith, that all the people who sing should sit together."

"With one exception," suggested Mr. Smith. "You would not like to air that fine tenor of yours in front of a man singing bass in unison, or behind a pew full of young ladies squalling out bad firsts and worse seconds."

"That is quite a different matter," said Mr. Rodewald, colouring (his sense of humour was not sufficiently strong to enable him to enjoy a joke which even by possibility told against himself) ; "of course when a person *can* sing he has a right to sing."

"But don't you see that every one who does sing believes he can sing ? The moment a person thinks he cannot sing he keeps silence. Every man would, as a rule, like to gag his neighbour, and every man has an idea that his own performance must give pleasure. The only result of any one taking a part in church is that the people around imagine he is singing wrong, and would ask him to stop if they could."

"That is the worst of living in a country, the inhabitants of which are, musically speaking, boors," said Mr. Rodewald, still irritable.

"Well, I admit that music is not our strong point," agreed Mr. Smith ; "but even if it were, I maintain that

people ought not to sing in church ; or, if they must sing, that they should all sit together. When I desire to hear your tenor, which is certainly a very good tenor, and well cultivated, I don't ask you, or want you, to stand just at my elbow ; and I don't see why, because I go to church, I should be doomed to a voice to right of me, a voice to left of me, a voice in front of me, and a voice behind."

"Would you not have anybody sing, then ?" asked Miss Lydney, who generally failed to understand above a fourth of Mr. Smith's utterances.

"On the contrary, I would have all bodies sing if it so pleased them, always provided they were at a distance from me. Congregational singing is not a bad thing, if you are out of the thick of it. The hundredth psalm—old C., as I have heard it called—is very effective if sung in unison (you need not shake your head, Rodewald ; I know what I am talking about, though I have not a fine tenor), when there is the length of a street between listener and performer. Take also singing in a Wesleyan chapel. How good and holy a thing it sounds if one is outside the chapel ! And yet personally, I confess, I do not care for it when I am amongst the congregation. Of course, there is a weak inoffensive sort of pipe one often hears, or rather sees, because it seems rather the throat which contracts and expands than the lips which give forth sound—so feeble and faint an attempt at tuning up that it can offend no ear."

"I think, Mr. Smith, you are very ill-natured," observed Miss Lydney, who was in the habit of emitting a series of little, almost inarticulate, thrills in the way of psalm-tunes. "I often wonder what good it can do you to go to church."

"I really cannot tell you, my dear lady," answered Mr. Smith, "unless I am like the man who said he went to church because there he could lay up his legs and think of nothing."

"The way you talk cannot be right," persisted Miss Lydney, scandalised ; "instead of going to church to be made better you return to criticise."

"Quite correct ; but I submit that it is not my fault. I would come back good, if I could ; but it is impossible, *This* afternoon, for instance, if you had asked me, before I started to Thamesford, whether I had any idea of the

nature of sin, I fancy I should have said 'Yes.' Well, we had a sermon about very little else ; and now I am quite at sea. I have not the faintest notion what sin is, unless, indeed, it may be virtue. There is one benefit, however, I derive from all these discourses. Were I inclined to turn infidel, I could not do it. Nothing which was not true could ever survive the sermons that are preached about it."

"I do not know how it happens, you always think the sermons so poor," remarked Miss Lydney ; "I never hear a bad preacher."

"Because you do not listen to half what the clergy tell you," answered Mr. Smith. "In church most people mentally lay up their legs, and think of nothing. Rectors and curates discourage the critical faculty in their congregations. They like their statements to be received without question or comment ; and, certainly, occasionally they do make some curious statements. The man at Thamesford told us to-day the two angels Mary saw in the sepulchre were the spirits of the two thieves. Of course, I am not in a position to say they were not, but I am perfectly certain he is not in a position to say they were."

"I suppose Thamesford looked very charming," said Mr. Rodewald, who saw that his sister-in-law disapproved of Mr. Smith's conversation without exactly following or understanding it.

"When does Thamesford not look charming?" asked Mr. Smith.

"Well, I confess I did not feel much attracted to it when the waters were out," answered his host. "Down here one gets a very good notion of what the Deluge must have been like."

"One sect of professing Christians did begin to build an ark some winters ago," said Mr. Smith, "rainbows notwithstanding. Your valley is very fair, however, after the floods. Certainly the walk across those fields to the ferry is extremely lovely. O, by-the-bye, Miss Lydney, as we were coming back, we met that tender little maiden of yours, the fair Eveleen."

"I call her Eliza," said Miss Lydney, grimly.

"We call them all Eliza," added Mr. Rodewald, referring to the family of "helps."

"And a very good name too ; only, at a very early period

of our acquaintance, your damsel informed me she was christened Eveleen, or, as she pronounces it, Evaline."

"Forward creature!" exclaimed Miss Lydney; "and what was she doing, Mr. Smith?"

"She was waiting for her young man—so she kindly stated."

"A chit like that!"

"Well, she is twenty, and she says she has been at service for ten years; and I suppose she would ask you, as a housemaid once asked my mother, if you thought it would be much good her waiting till she was an old woman."

"Young or old, she won't be much of a wife to any man," commented Miss Lydney.

"So the happy youth seemed to think, for he sauntered across the flowery meads very slowly—so slowly indeed, that at last she went to meet him. Annie and Susie were gathering lords and ladies, so I improved the opportunity by asking Miss Eveleen what she had heard at Mr. Granton's conventicle, where she told me there had been a special service."

"If you had asked her how many men looked at her, it would have been more in her way," said Miss Lydney, with a bitterness born of daily controversy upon the subject of thorough cleanliness.

"But, you see, I did not. What I said was, 'Well, Eveleen, and what did the strange minister tell you?' And she answered, 'It was a beautiful discourse, sir. He did speak so pretty about our 'ellish sins.'"

"What on earth did the girl mean?" asked Mr. Rodewald.

"I have not an idea," replied Mr. Smith.

"You will turn her pert head," said Miss Lydney.

"Who? I!" cried Mr. Smith. "I never turned a woman's head yet; and I can declare no woman ever turned her own head to look after me. The fair Eveleen will not be diverted from the straight path of domestic scrubbing and black-leading, by any ill-advised compliments of mine. But she is a pretty little thing, Miss Lydney. If you had seen her to-day, in a new bonnet trimmed with pink ribbons, you would have said she was as fair and fresh-looking a girl of her inches as anybody need wish to meet."

"There, I have no patience!" said Miss Lydney, rising, and so putting an end to the conversation.

Mr. Smith glanced across at Mr. Rodewald, and the two men burst out laughing. They could not help it. The expression of Miss Lydney's face was irresistible.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT REEDBOURNE STATION.

MR SMITH, carrying a modest black bag, was walking, on Easter Tuesday morning, up to the station with Mr. Rodewald, when a Stanhope, drawn by an exceedingly nice pair of chestnuts, and driven by a man who had not the slightest idea of letting the wheels of his chariot tarry, dashed past the two humble pedestrians.

"There goes that beast Field," said Mr. Rodewald.

"You use strong language, my friend," remarked Mr. Smith.

"Well, it's enough to make any man angry to see a fellow like that lording it over people who are ten times cleverer and twenty times honester than he ever was or ever will be."

"But don't you think it would be rather exhausting to lose one's temper every time a rogue passed one in a carriage and pair?"

"I don't think it would ever exhaust me to feel and express my righteous indignation at such a spectacle."

"All right. It was entirely in your interest that I spoke."

"Candidly, Smith, if—to bring the position home to yourself—you heard the book of a man you knew to be an ass, and incapable of writing anything good, praised by every one, while your own clever work was overlooked, should not you feel sore?"

"I don't fancy I should. You see, it is so completely a matter of course that the ass should be praised and the rogue successful, that it seems to me useless to vex one's soul about the inevitable."

"But then, Smith, you have no ambition."

"No, I have no ambition."

"That to me is unintelligible. I can't comprehend a man being destitute of the quality."

"Perhaps you do not comprehend a man being born blind, or losing his eyesight through misadventure."

Mr. Rodewald was silent for a moment; then he remarked,

"Of course, as you say, we are all differently constituted."

"Pardon me, I did not say so; that original observation is entirely your own."

"At any rate, you implied it."

"I did not." Mr. Smith said this quite flatly. He was sometimes what Mr. Rodewald called "blunt."

Whenever this particular mood was upon him, or, as Mr. Rodewald expressed the matter in his more jocular moments, "whenever that particular demon had possession of him," it always proved safer to change the subject.

With that delicate reticence, therefore, and avoidance of unpleasant subjects, which was characteristic of the man, Mr. Rodewald, after a minute's silence, remarked,

"I hope you have not forgotten another of your notes is due to-morrow week."

"I have not," said Mr. Smith, as shortly as before.

"And do let me impress upon you the necessity of seeing to the matter in good time. Better be three days too soon than a quarter of an hour too late. You have such a knack of driving things off to the last second, and it is so unpleasant for me."

"No doubt," agreed Mr. Smith, dryly acquiescent.

Mr. Rodewald looked askance at his companion, who, happening to meet the glance, smiled.

"It is no laughing matter," said Mr. Cheverley's tenant, nettled. "Punctuality may seem of small importance to you; but some day you will find it beyond even my power to stand between you and the consequences of your own procrastination."

"That will be a bad day for me, I expect."

"I do not know whether you are joking or not," began Mr. Rodewald.

"Then you can give me the benefit of the doubt," interrupted Mr. Smith.

"But all I can say is your levity is mistimed. It is un-

grateful of you to mock at the advice of one who has only your interest at heart. Sometimes, do you know, I fancy you must imagine I advance this money on my own account, and make a mere feint of telling you there is a hard creditor in the background."

"O, no, I don't," said Mr. Smith, with a prompt certainty there was no mistaking.

"Because, you know, there are people who fall into that error."

"I never should."

"You speak very confidently."

"Because I am probably more behind the scenes than any of the people who 'fall into that error.'"

"I fear I do not exactly grasp your meaning, Smith."

"My meaning? That is plain enough. I am positive there must be somebody in the background besides 'Bogie,' because I know you have not money to do these things out of your own pocket."

And Mr. Smith walked on as quietly as if he had not, morally speaking, hit Mr. Rodewald a blow between the eyes.

Like many individuals who have no compunction about rubbing their fellows' fur the wrong way, Mr. Rodewald could not endure the slightest scratch inflicted on his own self-esteem; nay, in this respect, he was so sensitive that he frequently imagined offence to be intended when really none was meant; and as Mr. Smith knew exactly where to touch the raw, there were times when the successful foreigner felt he hated this poor out-at-elbows waif.

Although it pleased Mr. Rodewald to speak of himself as a poor man, and of his position in life as lowly, he never felt charmed when others interpreted such expressions literally; and he had, therefore, to choke back an angry and mortified reply, before he could say calmly,

"I suppose you think I have not much money in reserve, because I live so plainly; but you make a mistake. I would not alter my style of living if I had an income of three thousand a year."

"You are wrong there," replied Mr. Smith. "You may be a very clever fellow, Rodewald—indeed, in your own particular line, you are *cleverer* than any other fellow I ever met; *but you are not clever enough to know yourself.*"

When you have lots of money—which you are quite sure to have one of these days—you will rent a big house and adapt your establishment to the ideas of society. Mind I don't say you will do this as a flourish. I know you, if you don't know yourself: and till you could see your way to paying for everything and leaving a good margin besides, you would not even keep a page-boy. But when you have the money and the margin, won't you launch out! Won't you change your mode of living! Won't you abjure early suppers and take to late dinners! Won't you eschew that old-fashioned mode of getting from one place to another we are now following, and loll back in your barouche with an assured ease Field himself might imitate in vain!"

"And when that day comes, dear friend," said Mr. Rodewald, his good-humour more than restored, "you will be there to wish me joy of the fortune prophesied to-day. Whether we toddle along on foot, as this morning, or loll back listening to the music made by eight iron-shod hoofs, I shall hope always to have you near to wish me God-speed."

"That wish you are quite sure of, Rodewald, wherever I chance to be," answered Mr. Smith. "Unlucky devil as I am and have been, I hope I have never desired that evil should befall even mine enemy. But when all that can be said and done, is said and done, the day you come into your own, that day you and I part company. As friends go, I hope I have served your purpose fairly well while you were not passing rich. Whenever the flocks and the herds of modern civilisation increase, we can shake hands and part still good friends, quite as good as of yore."

"But why should we ever shake hands and part? You don't think so meanly of me, I hope, as to imagine that change of fortune could alter my sentiments towards you?"

Mr. Smith smiled.

"One of the many mistakes people make," he said, "is that of imagining, in a world of change, anything, even friendship, can be eternal. It is a notion which converts that which should be a pleasure into a bore. Sufficient for the day, surely, should be the good as well as the evil. When you and I part, I trust I shall not think meanly of you; and I hope there may be no bitterness in either of our hearts when the inevitable day comes."

"But what I fail to understand is, why should it come?"

"If you would only give that excellent common sense of yours fair play, Rodewald, you could understand what I mean fast enough. The acquaintance of to-day may not fit into the groove of to-morrow; the bosom friend of adversity may prove a big thorn in the flesh when prosperity arrives. When your good fortune comes, I should not adorn it. You won't want me then, and, to be quite plain, I shall not want you. Do you suppose for a minute I should care to stay with you when all the simple routine of life at The Snuggery was overthrown? Do you think carriages and horses, men-servants and maid-servants, pomp and vanity, pride and display, could entice me away from my own two rooms? Situated as I am, of course I could dine out most evenings. I might partake of toothsome dishes served on silver, and take my choice of rare vintages proffered by decorous butlers and gorgeous Jeameses. But what I cannot get elsewhere is just what you have made me free of—*Home*; and when you are rich and have a fine house, and are served by many servants, and find a carriage waiting your arrival at the station, and receive company, and go out to parties, your place of abode will seem home to me no longer. I have fitted into your life of modest competence, and thank you for the share you have given me of your own domestic happiness; but I should be out of place in the life which will some day be yours."

"You are an oddity!" remarked Mr. Rodewald.

"Possibly; but the time must come when you will say, 'Ah, Smith was right enough! He would be horribly out of his element amongst all these prosperous decorous, ponderously respectable people. He would not understand them, and they would be scandalised with him.' Rodewald, I will promise you one thing," went on Mr. Smith, with a lurking devil in his eye: "If ever in your time of prosperity I see you marching round a church in a surplice, singing the while in that well-remembered tenor, I won't wink at *you*. I shall look at you as if we had never met before, as if I believed you to be a very saint, as if I considered you to be a dove in meekness and innocence."

"When you see me making a fool of myself, or playing

the hypocrite in any way, I give you leave to do and say what you please," retorted Mr. Rodewald.

"I will be merciful," replied Mr. Smith. "I will try to remember all the good I ever knew of you, and forget the evil; for there are times, incredible as it may sound, when I do think even you have a taint of original sin."

"You will find somebody else has, at any rate, if you don't attend to that affair of yours before next Wednesday week," said Mr. Rodewald, using the only weapon ready to his hand. "Like a good fellow, now, Smith, don't drive matters off to the last minute. You cannot really think how unpleasant it makes the business for me."

"All right," answered Mr. Smith, as they reached the station. "Now I am going to get a newspaper."

As he turned towards the bookstall, Mr. Rodewald walked slowly along the platform.

There were not many passengers waiting for that train—only the usual countryman in corduroys and a pilot-cloth coat, accompanied by his wife and child; the wife decked with all the colours of the rainbow, and the child gay with bright-tinted ribbons and nodding plumes and a fine pelisse. Without that countryman and party—without the old lady in a quilted petticoat, a rusty black silk dress, an obsolete bonnet, and burdened with many parcels; the young girl going out to service, or returning to her friends; the young man who is something very little in London, and who gives himself great airs on the strength of it—no country station can ever be considered as quite complete. But it was for game of a different sort Mr. Rodewald looked around.

"Yes, there, out on the platform, at a considerable distance from the booking-office, stood the person his gaze had been seeking—prosperous, insolent, bumptious, the centre of a knot of gentlemen, to whom he was apparently laying down the law.

Mr. Rodewald, sauntering along, took all this in, and determined to make one daring bid for Reedbourne society.

As he neared the group, Mr. Field, slightly turning his head, happened to see Mr. Rodewald approaching.

"Ah, Field, how do you do?" said the latter, holding out his hand. "Who would have thought of meeting you here?"

For answer Mr. Field, regarding his enemy sternly, raised his hat about an inch straight off his head, and put it on again; then without uttering a word, he turned his back upon Mr. Rodewald, and continued the conversation.

All of which Mr. Smith, following with his newspaper, chanced to behold.

Immediately, however, he retraced his steps to the book-stall, and was apparently occupied in looking at the dusty and gritty mental food laid out for the delectation of passengers, when Mr. Rodewald rejoined him.

"Anything fresh in the paper?" asked that gentleman; and Mr. Smith noticed he was unable quite to steady his voice.

"I have not looked at it yet, but I don't suppose there is. There never is."

"That scoundrel Field is on the platform."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Smith, innocently; "but, to be sure, he passed us."

"Going up to town to concoct some fresh villany, I'll be bound."

"To carry it out, more likely," suggested Mr. Smith; "no doubt he concocted it in church!"

"After all," thought Mr. Rodewald, as he wended his way back to The Snuggery—for on that Easter Tuesday *he* was not going to town to concoct, or carry out, anything—"there is a vast amount of good about Smith; and he can put things sometimes very neatly into a nutshell."

Which only meant that Mr. Rodewald approved his friend's utterance concerning De Field.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LITTLE DISCOVERY.

MR. RODEWALD'S offices in the city were to be found on the second-floor of an old house, situate in a narrow lane, leading out of a not much wider street, to the north of Cheapside, and running *indirectly* from that thoroughfare into *Gresham Street*.

The offices consisted of a fair-sized room in front, a

smaller chamber behind, and a mere slip of a place at the back of that, which was used for storing various odds and ends of lumber.

That Mr. Rodewald did not pay a high rent for his premises goes almost without saying. He was one of those men who have the knack of getting things cheap, of securing a penny's worth for every halfpenny expended. When he first knew the offices the tenant in possession was very hard up, and owed his landlord considerable arrears of rent. Mr. Rodewald bought the stock and furniture, paid the landlord half a year of the arrears, and brought the previous tenant a receipt in full for the old debt ; settled to take over the agreement himself, arranged his own books and papers upon the leather-covered office-table, sat down in the comfortable office-chair, and commenced life in the strange place as if he had been born and brought up there. Ere long, seeing how "things were going in the City," he secured a lease of the whole house ; and so worked the oracle that, if there were good tenants on all the floors, he made a profit out of the affair, and even if a room or two were unlet, managed himself to sit rent free.

An able, a hard-working, and a far-sighted man. There is a great deal in temperament ; and to Mr. Rodewald's temperament every game which paid even a trifle seemed worth the candle that lighted it.

So he had his offices for nothing ; and in like manner he got the services of small boys, who ran his errands and wrote the names of visitors upon slips of paper, for nothing also. They gave him a certain length of time free ; and if they behaved themselves he, in return, gave them a character which proved a fair enough start in the world. Mr. Rodewald did not "take everybody" into his office. He was chary about the antecedents of the lads he admitted to that distinction ; and he was, if possible, even more chary about his recommendations. As for clerks, book-keepers, and so forth, he did not want, and he would not have them.

"It is enough for me to know my own business," he said, in answer to some one who remarked upon the objection he entertained against all such assistance. "There is no necessity that the whole city of London should know it *likewise*."

Ostensibly Mr. Rodewald's business was cloth, but in effect anything at which an honest sixpence could be earned proved acceptable to him. The meshes of his net were big enough to catch a good large fish, and small enough to retain even the struggling fry. When once a man "got in" with the enterprising foreigner, he generally remained his customer.

Like the tales of the lady in the *Arabian Nights*, there was always something carried over to the next account; and it never seemed much use complaining of Mr. Rodewald's charges, so long as there was anything against the malcontent in his books.

There were very few things Mr. Rodewald could not have procured for a customer had a desire been expressed to have them; and he possessed, in addition to this general adaptability, a special adaptability, which in these days seems often essential to success.

Not the owner of sufficient capital almost to lose a fortune in business ere looking for a return, he knew how to shift and to tack, how to seize opportunities, how to embrace fresh occasions, in a way which might have appalled slower and less confident men.

Constantly he kept changing his front—to-day he was tendering for some clothing contract, to-morrow he would be asked to find a suitable site for a jute manufactory. One week he was moving heaven and earth to sell some chemical works in Germany, and the next he had not a minute to say "How d'ye do?" because he was negotiating for a good slice of Spitalfields, in the interests of the Huguenot Silk Weaving Company (Limited), with a capital of one million sterling!

Very few men could have done the amount of work Mr. Rodewald accomplished, and scarcely any men could have done it so well.

Many might have despised the small profits—the five pounds here, the five shillings there—for which Mr. Rodewald was content to labour; but while they were waiting for some great success, he was little by little making his "pile."

No one understood better than he that, if twenty shillings made a pound, twelve pence made a shilling, and that consequently twelve pence was something towards a pound.

Considering the number of virtues Mr. Rodewald possessed, it might have been thought that every person must like him; yet the fact was very few people did like him.

Prejudice, perhaps, or want of discernment, or probably he erred in that matter of manner, or possibly, as Mr. Smith once suggested, he was "too good."

Upon the afternoon of that Wednesday when his friend's "note" was due, Mr. Rodewald did certainly not feel good; on the contrary, he was in a very bad temper.

Mr. Smith, as usual, had driven off arranging the matter till the eleventh hour; but, what was unusual, he had not, even at the eleventh hour, put in an appearance. On the contrary, he had never come near Mr. Rodewald—never shown himself, never could be found when Mr. Rodewald called at his chambers.

As a matter of course, the note, which really was not in Mr. Rodewald's hands, must have been presented and dishonoured.

"Well," said that gentleman, flinging down his pen, "he will have the consequences. He has chosen to play the fool, and he must pay for his folly. It is too late now to do anything, even if there were anything to be done."

"Any one within?" at that precise moment asked the culprit, knocking at the inner door with the handle of his umbrella. The boy, at that period on his promotion, chanced to be out, and there was consequently no person in the outer office to answer Mr. Smith's question. "Any one within?" he repeated, turning the handle and looking across the room at Mr. Rodewald.

"I am in," answered the gentleman, flinging himself back in his chair, and thrusting his hands deep in his pockets. "And as I *am* in, what have you got to say to me?"

"Well I thought I would just look round and ask how you were."

"O, indeed; much obliged, I am sure. Pray do you happen to know what day of the month this is?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And may I further ask you if you know what the hour is?"

"Your clock is about right," answered Mr. Smith, looking up at that article of furniture.

"Well, then, what do mean by it? Don't you know your acceptance would be presented to-day?"

"Probably it would."

"Probably, indeed! certainly! Have I not told you over and over and over again I don't hold your paper, that I am merely an agent in the matter, that I have tried to do what I could for you; but that, as my influence was limited, I could only do it in my own way? I have almost gone security for you with my principal, and this is the way you treat me. Well, it will be a lesson."

"Look here, Rodewald," said Mr. Smith, dropping into a chair, "what was it you wanted me to do?"

"What I always wanted you to do—attend to your business in time. And now look at the clock. It is just a quarter to five o'clock; your acceptance has been presented, has been dishonoured, and is about on its way to the notary by this time. It is ruin, perfect ruin! However, things must now take their course. I wash my hands of you and your affairs."

"But supposing the nefarious document is not taking a gentle stroll to the notarial office?"

"I tell you it must be. Unless I have the management of the matter, everything goes through the bank in regular course. Nothing of the sort is ever presented over the counter."

"And what then?"

"What then? Good Heavens, Smith, are you an absolute fool? Haven't you come to years of discretion? You have been dabbling in bills ever since I knew you; and now, when, after all my warnings, you have neglected to arrange the matter in proper time, you come to me with your 'what thens!'"

"My dear fellow, how refreshing it is to hear you talk! Your belief in the utter imbecility of every one but yourself is so thorough that it is better to listen to you than to sit out a play. Suppose, now, for the sake of variety, you imagine I am not what you are pleased to term an absolute fool, and that for once I really have attended to my own business."

"But I can't imagine anything of the sort," retorted Mr. Rodewald. "You don't know who holds the note, so you couldn't arrange affairs with him; besides he would not have listened to you."

"Likely not; nevertheless, think—was there no other course open?"

"None that I can conceive of. I fail to imagine how you could have arranged it without my intervention, short of meeting the bill; and that—"

"Is impossible, you would add. Well, then, I feel much pleasure in assuring you I have performed an impossibility. For once I had enough money to pay that which I promised to pay four months after date—and I payed it. Congratulate me."

Mr. Rodewald, in answer to this invitation, arose, and seizing his friend's hand, grasped it till all the fingers tingled.

"I do congratulate you!" he said, with a heartiness which was just a trifle too demonstrative to be genuine. "But why did you not give me the hint of your intentions? I assure you I have been undergoing agonies of apprehension on your account. You don't know what a Shylock the man is who holds those acceptances. I often wonder how you would manage about all that paper if anything were to happen to me."

"I'd offer to tell you hereafter," answered Mr. Smith, gravely, "but that I scarcely know where one would be likely to find you in another world. However, comfort yourself. There is no great probability of your dying at present. Do you remember the epitaph old Cross Grain put on his wife's tomb after he had worried her into her grave?—

'God takes the good, too good on earth to stay,
And leaves the bad, too bad to take away.'

You will not be wanted for a long time yet—never, perhaps. You have not dined. I can read the fact in your pallid cheek. You have been sitting here fasting, and cursing me, instead of discussing a chop and a pint of stout. Come with me, I have not eaten either."

"I am sure of that. I wish I could be as sure of something else."

"Of what something else, O man of mystery?"

"Never mind. Yes, I will go with you. You had pretty well driven away all my appetite, but I daresay I shall be able to relish something now."

And, having so spoken, Mr. Rodewald cloked up his

drawers, put on his hat, affixed a label on his office door, stating "Return uncertain," and signified that he was ready.

"You might run down with me to-night," he suggested, as they walked along. "The country is looking better than it did a week ago."

"Many thanks; but I am in the vein for working, and I must continue to work, lest seven other devils should come to take possession of me instead of the one just got rid of. Excuse me a moment;" and he turned into a chemist's shop. "Now I am yours to command," he said, when he came out again.

They dined, at Mr. Smith's expense, as that gentleman insisted. He ordered wine; but though he drank of it, Mr. Rodewald could perceive, in his after conversation, no confirmation of the idea he had entertained concerning a previous indulgence in intoxicating liquors.

Yet Mr. Smith's tongue ran on more glibly than usual, and his spirits seemed better than Mr. Rodewald had ever known them.

As it was long past the hour when City dining-rooms are crowded, it so happened that they had the apartment quite to themselves, and there was consequently no necessity for Mr. Smith to be cautious in his utterances or reticent in his conversation.

Never had Mr. Rodewald heard him speak so much to advantage. It was as though the man had stripped off some disguise, and appeared for once in his natural character.

"I think," he said at last, "I must be 'fey,' as the Scotch expression is. Some awful misfortune is surely in store for me. I have not felt so cheerful for years. And only to think it is all because I was able to scrape together a hundred and fifty pounds."

"There are others, remember," remarked Mr. Rodewald.

"I know it, my friend; but there is one the less for all that; so let me enjoy my success while I can. To-morrow it will be behind, and the others before; but to-day I have conquered, and may rest myself for an hour." And he poured out a full glass of wine as he spoke.

"You won't be angry, Smith, if I say something?" asked Mr. Rodewald.

"I don't think I shall ; but all depends, of course, upon what the something is," was the answer.

"Well, I wouldn't overdo that ;" and Mr. Rodewald glanced significantly towards the bottle.

"Now, what can you mean ?" exclaimed the person so advised.

"Just what I say, Smith ; you know I only speak for your good. You have got yourself rid to-day of one embarrassment, and I always notice that when you are a little straight you at once—"

"Speak out, can't you ? I at once, you were saying—go on."

"Why should I ? You know what I mean—"

"How should I know what you mean, unless you will be good enough to finish some of your half-finished sentences ? Do you suppose I drink ?"

"Now, my dear fellow, don't be angry ; don't get into a passion. I never should have so worded the idea ; only, perhaps—"

"You either mean a thing, it is fair to conclude, or you do not. What is the use of your pretending to be mealy-mouthed ? Do you think I drink ?—plainly, do you ?"

"Well, at times, I—"

"Did you ever see me drink too much ?"

"No ; but—"

"Don't you know I am one of the most temperate men living ?"

"I admit, as a rule, you are. Yet, still—"

"Yet, still, clever as I know you to be, you are not half so sharp as I thought you."

"I did not mean to offend you, Smith. Upon my honour, I would not have spoken, only I really do take the deepest interest in your welfare."

"I never doubted that," said Mr. Smith, a little bitterly.

"When you come to think matters over coolly, you won't be angry with me for speaking."

"I am not angry now ; on the contrary, I am very glad indeed you have spoken."

"That's right ;" and Mr. Rodewald, in token of amity, put out his hand, which Mr. Smith, looking around for his hat, either did not see, or feigned not to notice.

"If you are ready we will go now," he said. "I have work to finish to-night."

"I can walk part of the way back with you," volunteered Mr. Rodewald.

"Thank you; but as I want to call again at the chemist's, I can walk back so far with you."

When they reached the shop, Mr. Rodewald, entering with his friend, saw a small bottle done up in white paper handed across the counter, for which Mr. Smith paid, exchanging some remark about the weather with the assistant as he did so.

"Under the doctor, Smith?" asked Mr. Rodewald, as they walked out into the street together.

"No! I prescribe for myself," was the curt reply.

"I don't think I'll go westward with you," observed Mr. Rodewald, changing the subject; "there may be something for me to do at the office."

"I'll be bound there is," said Mr. Smith, with alacrity.

"Good-bye for the present. Give my love to the children; and he walked off, his ungainly figure towering above, and conspicuous among the teeming crowds that at that moment thronged the pavements.

Mr. Rodewald watched him for a moment, and then retraced his steps to the chemist's.

He was an occasional customer at the shop, and knew the assistant well.

"I was not aware my friend dealt with you," he said carelessly, while the man was looking out the few articles he asked for.

"That gentleman who came in with you just now? O, he has dealt with us for years."

"You seem to know pretty well what he wants?" said Mr. Rodewald, as a leading question.

"He generally wants the one thing," answered the assistant, with a meaning smile.

"The one thing!" repeated Mr. Rodewald, as if he knew all about it.

"And having dealt with us so long, of course, we make no difficulty about letting him have it."

"I thought you were not allowed to supply it to any one in quantity?" said Mr. Rodewald, groping in the dark, yet fancying he saw a glimmer of light.

"Well, as a rule, we don't, you know; but when he first came here, he brought a prescription from a doctor in

the country, who used to have a lot of things from us. So much to be taken so many times a day. He does not use anything like the quantity he did at one time, though. The governor got into the habit of calling him De Quincey in those days, and would say to me, 'Here's "Murder as a Fine Art" coming again,' or something jocular of that sort when he saw him crossing the street."

"I have noticed," remarked Mr. Rodewald, who had now got at the bottom of the mystery, "that he occasionally seems quite excited with it. I suppose it is a very powerful stimulant?"

"It is with some people; and yet it deadens feeling too. In fact, there are men it affects just as brandy does others. I know a gentleman who, regularly as he goes out to a dinner-party, takes so many drops; and I am told he is a most brilliant talker."

"Ah!" said Mr. Rodewald. "Curious, very. How much am I to pay you?" And having so spoken, he put down upon the counter the amount named, took up his purchases, bade the assistant "Good-day," and left the shop.

"So that is your little vice, Smith, is it?" he soliloquised, while hurrying back to his office; "and I was mistaken for once. And yet I was not. After all, it is only another sort of dram-drinking—somewhat less expensive, and a good deal more insidious than gin. Wonder if he earned or borrowed the money with which he took up his note? Got an advance, most likely. Well, I shall know everything about *that*, too, in good time."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SMALL ADVENTURE.

It was the height of summer. Adown in the Thames valley a stifling heat brooded over the landscape by day, and cool airs wandered here and there and everywhere by night, caressing the long grasses, rustling amongst reeds, flitting across the weirs, and stealing softly through the *leaves* of the alders and willows bordering the darkling *streams* and lonely rivers.

Once again Mr. Smith was a visitor at The Snuggery, where he had not before been since Easter. When pressed by Mr. Rodewald to run down for a few days or even for a few hours, his answer always was that he could not afford time to do so.

"I am working very hard indeed," he said at last explicitly.

"You are not working at your chambers, then," retorted Mr. Rodewald, "for I have called there at least a dozen times, and never once found you within."

"No; I have an engagement which requires me to be often out of town," was the reply; but all Mr. Rodewald's inquiries failed to elicit what the nature of that engagement was. Never very communicative, Mr. Smith seemed latterly to have become possessed by a very demon of secrecy. He never now told Mr. Rodewald what he was writing, or whether he was writing anything. His whole energies seemed devoted to making money. He had paid another of those bills which Mr. Rodewald once firmly believed were destined to be renewed for ever, and that gentleman felt, and indeed did not hesitate to say, "You are like all the rest of the world, Smith. So long as a person can be of use to you, you are ready enough to humour his fancy; but the minute you are able to do without his help, he may go hang himself for aught you care."

Mr. Smith smiled.

"Come, Rodewald," he answered, "you don't think so badly of the world as all that comes to, and you must not be angry with me because I am trying honestly to pay my debts. You used to bully me enough when I could not pay them, now did not you?"

"No; I am sure I never did anything of the kind. All I ever asked you to do was to attend to your business in proper time. And it is very fine to talk about working hard and pay your debts; but if that is what you are doing really, why cannot you tell me how you are earning your money?"

"There are secrets in all trades," said Mr. Smith.

"There is no secret in mine," retorted Mr. Rodewald, "and I don't believe there is in yours, only you choose to make a mystery about the matter. The fact is, you have found some richer and grander acquaintances, and you don't care to visit the insignificant folks who inhabit The Snug-

gery. Well, I did not think, Smith, you would have been the one to teach the children their first lesson in the deceitfulness of friendship."

"The cap does not fit," replied Mr. Smith, speaking slowly, "and, therefore, I cannot wear it if I would; you are doing me an injustice. There is nowhere I like so much to go, which I feel so much resembles home, as that dear little place amongst the daisies and the buttercups."

"I believe you are speaking honestly!" exclaimed Mr. Rodewald, mollified.

"You may believe it," was the reply.

"Then come down with me this afternoon."

"I cannot; but the first afternoon I have at my disposal I will go round to your office, and communicate the pleasing fact. You can but refuse to house me."

Mr. Rodewald laughed. "That is so likely!" he remarked.

"Well, at any rate I will place myself at your disposal; you can do as you like."

"Agreed," said the other, holding out his hand.

This was a way Mr. Rodewald had. He would shake hands over the most ordinary affairs of existence, as though entering into compacts likely to influence his whole life.

It was in consequence of his share of this bargain that Mr. Smith found himself once again, after an unusually long absence, in the valley of the Thames. Where he had been in the interim, and how occupying himself, Mr. Rodewald was as wise or as ignorant as ever; but the charm of the neighbourhood evidently remained undiminished; for Mr. Smith more than once looked round the quaint little rooms with a smile of satisfaction, and, as he and his host paced up and down the short avenue side by side, he stopped now and then to inhale the pure air, sweet with a thousand fragrant scents, and, taking off his hat, walked bareheaded, letting the cool wind fan his temples.

It was a lovely evening, and as they walked the twilight came gently on.

Everything was very still. Sometimes when they paused in their talk they could hear the plashing of the water over the weirs, or the cry of some night-bird, or the whirr and the whizz of a distant train cleaving the silence, but otherwise there was no noise.

"I have taken this house on for another year," remarked Mr. Rodewald, after one of those conversational pauses which occur so frequently and so naturally to talkers in the country—pauses when it seems as though one were listening for something or somebody that never comes.

"Then you are learning to like the place," commented Mr. Smith.

"I always liked the place; it was the people," amended Mr. Rodewald.

"I beg your pardon, of course. Then you are learning to like the people?"

"You are probably not aware of the fact," observed Mr. Rodewald, "but you have fallen lately into a sort of chaffing manner, which some persons might consider very objectionable. As a friend you will not mind me mentioning this, I am sure."

"Thank you; on the contrary, I feel obliged. To return to our sheep, however, you are learning to like the Reed-bournians?"

"I have told you already that I dislike being chaffed."

"My dear Rodewald, what am I to say to please you?" remonstrated Mr. Smith. "You convey a friendly hint in the form of a general statement, and expect me to understand you imagined I was mocking you. Tell me your meaning, and then I will try to sympathise. Are you *not* learning to love your neighbours as yourself?"

"No, I am not," answered Mr. Rodewald, sulkily. "There is nothing to love in them."

"As a rule, I remark that persons dislike those they do not know."

"As a rule, I remark I dislike persons I do know," retorted Mr. Rodewald.

"You are doubtless quite right; but I am still unable to comprehend why, under the circumstances, you propose to remain on here. It is inconvenient for your business; there are plenty of little places round London that would suit you just as well, and be much more accessible. I remember last winter you were always grumbling about the roads, or the water, or the darkness, or the rain; and as winter will be upon us *again ere long*, I really feel at lost to imagine *why you elect to stay in so remote a locality*."

"Look here, Smith," said Mr. Rodewald, stopping in his

leisurely saunter, to the end that he might make his address more impressive, "did you ever know me beaten in anything I set my heart upon?"

"I have no doubt you have been," answered Mr. Smith; "but I confess I cannot recollect such an occurrence."

"And you never will," retorted Mr. Rodewald, triumphantly.

"To apply the statement," suggested his companion.

"I do not mean to let Reedbourne beat me. I mean to make Reedbourne acknowledge me, treat me as a person worth its notice, respect me, love me, fear me, which you like, anything except ignore me. If it takes twenty years—why, I will spend twenty years in compassing my object. Do you understand now why I elect to stay here?"

"Yes, I think so," answered Mr. Smith slowly, shivering a little as he spoke.

Though he had been in this man's power and used not wholly ungently, he never could repress a shuddering sense of fear when Mr. Rodewald showed the worst side of his nature.

"Heaven forbid I should ever anger him, and lie at his mercy!" was the muttered thought which crossed the mind of this football of fortune. "It would not fare well with me."

"I cannot recollect," proceeded Mr. Rodewald, complacently, "that I ever suffered anything to conquer me; and I do not intend to be conquered by Reedbourne."

"So you said before," was Mr. Smith's reply.

"I do not know what you are smiling at," said Mr. Rodewald quickly. "You seem to find all my remarks singularly amusing this evening."

"No, I do not," answered the other. "I assure you they strike me as anything rather than amusing. If I smiled, it was only because I was wondering how on earth you could consider such a game worth any candle. What sin, in Heaven's name, have the people here committed, that you should set out on a crusade against them? Why cannot you be content to let them alone, as they have most kindly left you alone? Were the case mine, I should *feel* most heartily grateful to them for their neglect."

"Ay, but you and I are two different men. Nothing *seems* of much value to you, and everything is of import-

ance to me. Fame, success, riches, you would not even stretch out your hand to gather, if they hung within your reach. You are indolent, Smith ; indeed, if it were not for fear of giving offence, I should say you are 'lazy.'

"Pray do not let the fear of giving offence exercise any restraint upon your habitual candour," entreated Mr. Smith. "I need not tell so astute an individual as yourself that no amount of fault-finding can change a sinner into a saint ; but if it is any pleasure to you to catalogue my errors, proceed ; my back is broad enough."

"I am sure, Smith, you must clearly understand," Mr. Rodewald was beginning, when a shrill call from Miss Lydney, announcing that "supper was ready," proved a welcome diversion to one at least of the gentlemen.

As was invariably the case at The Snuggery, the viands were of their kind admirable.

"There is one thing," Mr. Rodewald was wont to remark, "that the English can do, and that is grow beef," for which reason he affected the familiar sirloin, and the succulent ribs, and the juicy round ; preferred his plump Dorkings in all the native simplicity of roast and boiled ; and eschewed foreign kickshaws as unnecessary in a land where meat needed no disguise.

Miss Lydney could have learned the mysteries of "made dishes," as she could have learned anything else for which her brother-in-law developed a fancy ; but as he preferred English cookery to all others, she had but to exercise her talents in one accustomed groove.

"You are not eating anything, Mr. Smith," she said plaintively, on the evening in question. "I am sorry there is nothing on the table you like."

"There is everything I generally like," answered the person so addressed ; "but of late, food and I seem to have had a quarrel. I am never hungry."

"Fact is, Smith," observed Mr. Rodewald, "you have been living on the fat of the land, and have grown too nice to relish our humble fare."

Mr. Smith turned and looked at the speaker, then made an unexpected reply.

"What you say is partly true," he agreed. "I have lately been living in a style as much beyond my requirements as my desires, but that would only make me enjoy a meal

health, of what benefit would m

"I think it would be of mo
answered Mr. Smith. "But
though I am working hard now,
of doing so for long. There is
minute; but the small crop
carried, and then—why, I shall
time on my hands."

"Your friends are very much
great work which is occupying
Rodewald.

"I am sure my friends are ver
negligently.

"I cannot imagine why in ar
be such mystery—" Mr. Rod
some asperity; but there he st
there came a curious knocking
porch door, impatient and yet
person without, after searching
in very despair, commenced han
and, encouraged by the noise h
continue hammering till he arou

"What the deuce is that?"
down his knife and fork.

"It is someone knocking at

But it was not a burglar, or even a tramp ; spite of the huge noise she had managed to make, the visitor was nothing more formidable than a woman, who, in a very shaky voice and in a very nervous manner, began,

"I beg your pardon, sir ; I am very sorry to disturb you ;" the truth being that Mr. Rodewald's sudden and very theatrical opening of the door had almost frightened her out of the few wits she ever possessed, and at first rendered her words almost unintelligible.

"What can I do for you ?" asked Mr. Rodewald, whose naturally sharp vision, aided by the light of a rising moon, made out at once that the speaker was no pauper.

"I am so sorry ; I beg your pardon a thousand times I am sure. I would not for any consideration have come to a gentleman's house in such a manner ; but I could see no other house near us, and—"

"Pray walk in," said Mr. Rodewald ; "you seem to have been frightened." And, with much courtesy, he managed to edge his unexpected visitor across the hall and into the dining-room.

At a glance he took in all her apparel ; rich silk dress, velvet mantle, onyx brooch, gold watch, gold chain, expensive bonnet, good gloves.

"Yes, sir, I am so shocked to trouble you."

"No trouble at all, quite the contrary," said Mr. Rodewald, while Mr. Smith placed a chair for the lady, and took her in otherwise.

Yes ! he saw all Mr. Rodewald had seen, and arrived at a different conclusion.

"*Not* a gentlewoman," he decided.

"I hope—" Mr. Rodewald was beginning, when she got up again and said,

"I must not stop ; poor dear, what am I thinking of, to sit down while she is waiting for me ?"

"There is some one, then, outside ?" suggested Mr. Smith.

"Yes ; I will try to tell how it happened. Dear, how my heart beats !"

"Have a glass of wine, ma'am," interposed Miss Lydney, and she hurried away to procure that stimulant.

"We had left *Miss Mercer's*," began the lady in explanation, "*where Mrs. Posinby* would insist upon staying for

tea, and were hurrying down to the ferry, when, in crossing the stile in the lane, she fell, I don't know how, and hurt her ankle—"

"Yes?" said Mr. Rodewald, inquiringly.

"And the lady, what became of her?" asked Mr. Smith, grasping facts more quickly.

"She is sitting in agony on a heap of stones, and I don't know how I am ever to get her home; and, O dear! I am so sorry to trouble you; but I don't think I was ever in such a dilemma in all my life before."

"Poor fool, it is to be hoped not," considered Mr. Smith, but he only said,

"Can you tell us where your friend is, madam?"

Sipping wine, and drivelling on with her poor ripple of talk, Mr. Smith's sharp incisive manner acted upon her like a douche.

"I will go and show you, sir," she answered, rising with alacrity. "She will be counting the minutes till my return."

"No doubt," acquiesced Mr. Smith, grimly; and then, after a short delay, the three set out together.

They had to walk over a quarter of a mile before reaching the heap of stones indicated.

From afar their female companion screamed out,

"How are you now, dear?" repeating the phrase at intervals, till at length a faint reply reached their ears.

"O! is that you? I am so glad."

"Do you think you can walk, darling?" asked the voluble assistant, as with difficulty the disabled woman was helped to a standing position.

"I will try," was the answer, spoken in a low plaintive voice; but then there came a scream.

"It is impossible," said the sufferer. "If I have to remain till morning, I must stay till you fetch the carriage."

Whereupon, as Mr. Smith, even in the light of a rising moon, saw, Mr. Rodewald pricked up his ears.

Nevertheless, since everything in England, from a pony-trap to a barouche, is styled a carriage, that gentleman did not quite know what to make of the lady seated upon the heap of stones.

In his uncertainty he whispered,

"What is to be done, Smith? What can we do?"

"Carry her to The Snuggery," answered Mr. Smith, in the same low tone; and, without waiting for a reply, he went on, "Mr. Rodewald and I are quite able to take you to a place where you can remain until a carriage is procured. Will you permit us to do so?"

"O, pray do, love!" entreated the companion, with an effective *tremolo* in her voice. "You know how delicate you are, and you would catch your death of cold sitting here any longer, and on those hard rough stones, too. This gentleman's house is not far away, and I am sure he will kindly send some one for the carriage."

"But I feel so sorry and ashamed to give so much trouble."

"I can assure you we feel honoured in being permitted to assist you," answered Mr. Rodewald, for whom weak and delicate women really did possess a great attraction.

"If you are quite ready, Rodewald," said Mr. Smith, who saw no reason why this conversation should not, unless he interrupted it, be carried on for another hour, "I think we had better take the lady to your house. No useful purpose can be served by our remaining here."

"None whatever," exclaimed the uninjured lady. "You must let these gentlemen take charge of you, Ethel; it is impossible for you to remain sitting here."

"Very well," acquiesced Mrs. Posinby; "but indeed I am grieved to be the cause of so much trouble. Could not you, dear Miss Wickenden, get me a conveyance from somewhere? There are surely flies to be had in the village."

But with decision dear Miss Wickenden negated this proposition.

"I have not the faintest idea where any conveyance is to be had in the neighbourhood," she said, in a tone which implied she, at any rate, did not intend to run about the Reedbourne Wilds on any crazy goose chase. "One of these gentlemen, perhaps—"

"If you will kindly make use of my house—" Mr. Rodewald once more began.

"The lady ought not to remain here," capped Mr. Smith. "When we get her to The Snuggery she can decide what she wishes done. Now, Rodewald, gently; yes, that is right. Tell us, please, madam, if we cause you any pain or inconvenience."

And so, without another word, the two men lifted their burden, and under the moonlight walked, through a lane bordered by thick hedgerows enclosing fields quite full of daisies and buttercups, home.

So, with the steady march of men accustomed to keeping step with the rank and file of every-day life, they strode along, each busy with his own thoughts, but unconscious of the change that night's work was to make in their lives; so quietly they paced sturdily on, in a silence only broken by the sound of their own footsteps, by the plashing of distant water, and by the babbling remarks of Miss Wickenden, to which probably no one but herself gave the slightest heed, and to which certainly no one made any reply.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE.

WITH a lamp held high in order to aid the moon in her efforts to light up the scene, Miss Lydney greeted the procession when it reached The Snuggery.

Always helpful, quiet, and thoughtful, she just glanced at the white face leaning a little over Mr. Rodewald's arm, and then, without asking a question, turned and led the way swiftly across the hall into the drawing-room, and, motioning to the sofa, set the lamp down, and, after comfortably arranging the pillows, left the room to seek such remedies as were at hand.

For Mrs. Posinby had fainted. The fact was patent enough, even without Miss Wickenden's little dismayed shriek.

Mr. Smith laid his fingers on the slender wrist for a moment, and then said almost to himself,

"She is but a delicate plant."

"A complete exotic," added Miss Wickenden.

"Requires care, I should say."

"Requires, and has it," answered Miss Wickenden, severely. "She is able to command everything."

"Except health," conjectured Mr. Smith.

"Ah, yes, poor dear ! and something else to ;" and Miss Wickenden sighed portentously.

If she expected either of the gentlemen to ask what the other something Mrs. Posinby lacked might be, she was mistaken.

It is possible if Mr. Rodewald alone had been present, he would have begged for further information, but his friend's proximity deterred him.

"What do you think is the matter?" he questioned instead, speaking softly.

"I suppose the shock," Mr. Smith replied. "She is a fragile creature evidently, and unable to bear much pain, I should imagine, whether physical or mental."

"Ah !" sighed Miss Wickenden once more.

"What can we do with her?" continued Mr. Rodewald.

"Keep her here till morning, I should say, if she can be induced to remain. I could return to town quite easily by the last train.

"I cannot avoid hearing what you are saying, gentlemen," here interposed Miss Wickenden, with an engaging simper, "but what you propose is quite impossible. It is too kind of you even to think of such a thing ; but it is essential that Mrs. Posinby should return home as soon as a conveyance can be procured. You will, I am sure, pardon my not fully explaining my reasons for such a remark," added the lady, feigning an enticing reticence. "In all families there are little secrets, and—"

"Pray do not say another word," entreated Mr. Rodewald relieved ; for at the moment he neither wished Mr. Smith to go nor Mrs. Posinby to remain. "Anything my poor house contains is, I need scarcely add, at the service of yourself and friend ; but, of course, you must understand the necessity for her return home much better than I—"

"Be silent now, please, for a minute," said Mr. Smith ; "I think she is recovering consciousness ;" and such indeed, proved to be the case.

Under the remedies Miss Lydney, aided by Mr. Smith, had been applying, the lady's face grew less deathlike, her lips parted slightly, her eyelids unclosed, and a tremor shook her frame.

"O, thank goodness !" exclaimed Miss Wickenden. "Ethel dear, speak to me ; don't be frightened, darling ;

we are all friends ; do you hear me, love ?—you are among friends, kind friends."

The look of incredulous amazement Miss Lydney turned upon the speaker was only equalled by Mr. Smith's imperturbable solemnity.

As for Mr. Rodewald, divided between his desire of knowing who his visitors really were, and his anxiety as to whether the lady could be removed, he paid small attention to Miss Wickenden's little graces.

With a petulant gesture, Mrs. Posinby moved her head upon the pillow, and said, feebly,

"Where am I? Will no one tell me what has happened?"

It was then Mr. Smith, looking on, began to discern that even a creature like Miss Wickenden might have her use and object. In a vague way he had been wondering why she was permitted to remain in existence, but it became clear to him as he listened.

"I have told you, darling," said that lady, "you are here among friends ; you hurt your foot coming from Miss Mercer's, and it frightened you. We will take you home directly ; you would like to go home, wouldn't you?"

"Like to go home! of course. What is the time? Louis will be back ; where is my bonnet? Let us return at once ;" and she raised herself on her arm, and attempted to sit up, in doing which she moved her ankle, and fell back screaming.

"O, what was that?—what have I done? O, such agony! O, Heaven!"

"Now, Ethel, you must be calm, dear," said Miss Wickenden. "I will tell you exactly what has happened, and what we are going to do. You have sprained your ankle, and we intend sending for the carriage, and making you quite comfortable. Do not try to move again, love, till I return ;" and so saying, she retired from the apartment, mysteriously beckoning Mr. Rodewald to follow her.

Taking advantage of their absence, Mr. Smith knelt down at the foot of the sofa, in order to ascertain what the nature of the injury was.

"We ought to have the boot off," he said ; and, asking for neither leave nor license, with quick deft fingers cut away the covering, signing for Miss Lydney to help him.

"No bone broken," he remarked, after a minute's examination, "and nothing dislocated; merely a sprain, and not a bad one—only she is not accustomed to pain."

With a sufficiently expressive glance, Miss Lydney conveyed her opinion as to the capabilities of the lady to bear anything.

"I suppose she can be moved?" she whispered inquiringly.

"There is nothing to prevent it," was the answer, spoken equally low. "She will be far better at home."

"I suppose she ought to have the ankle bandaged?" suggested Miss Lydney.

"She is sure to have it bandaged, whether she ought or not; doctors understand their patients pretty well," was the answer. "Yes, I think you might get a bandage, and I should give her half a glass of wine now. Pour it out, please, and I will raise her up to take it."

"Thank you, O, thank you!" said Mrs. Posinby, sweetly and prettily, as he put his left hand under the pillow, and so lifted her head the while he held the wine for her to swallow. "How kind you are, how very, very kind!" and she smiled at him as she had been accustomed all her life to smile at people, and lay down and closed her eyes, and Mr. Smith looked upon her less admiringly than critically.

Yes; he had seen this sort of woman before, as, indeed, he had seen most sorts of women.

"Of no use to herself or nobody else," he decided; wherein Mr. Smith, like many other persons given to generalise, chanced to be wrong.

Ere long Mrs. Posinby proved that she could be of very great use to one person at all events.

As Miss Lydney was leaving the room to procure the bandages, Miss Wickenden re-entered the apartment, followed by Mr. Rodewald, who, coming up close to Mr. Smith, said in a low tone,

"Come out with me; I want you for a moment."

They went out together—not merely into the hall, but into the garden.

By this time the moon had got well away from the depressing influence of a bank of clouds which impeded her at first rising, and was now shedding a calm and silvery light

over the landscape, and the two men walked on under her beams.

Evidently, however, Mr. Rodewald was bursting with the importance of the tidings he desired to communicate.

When they reached the old well, he could contain himself no longer.

"Smith," he said, pulling up quite short, and laying a hand upon his companion's arm to stop him also, "do you know who these people are?"

"Well, no," answered Mr. Smith, taken a little by surprise certainly, no less by his host's manner than by the question itself. "I can hazard a guess, however, that Mrs. Posinby is not the Queen travelling in strict incognita, and Miss Wickenden not one of her Majesty's ladies-in-waiting to play propriety."

Mr. Rodewald walked on a few steps offended; then regaining his equanimity, he said,

"Mrs. Posinby is certainly not the Queen; but she is a great power in this neighbourhood. She lives at View Water."

"And where is View Water? Forgive me, Rodewald, for my stupidity, if, indeed, it be stupidity, but you must remember I am not up in your local celebrities."

"And would not be, I know, if you lived here a thousand years," retorted Mr. Rodewald, genially complimentary as usual. "That is precisely the difference between you and me, Smith. Whenever I settle in a neighbourhood, if only for a week—"

"Suppose you spare me all that," suggested Mr. Smith, cutting ruthlessly across the self-laudation. "I have heard it, or, at all events, something very like it, before; and besides, you must not forget the name of Posinby conveyed no sort of meaning even to you when you heard it. Where is View Water, and what is Posinby?"

"If you are going to mock at everything I say, I shall not trouble myself to talk to you further," and Mr. Rodewald turned on his heel with a gesture of displeasure.

"All right," acquiesced Mr. Smith; and he walked slowly down the garden, thinking whether he ought not to leave The Snuggery that night, that moment, and never cross its threshold more.

He was getting tired of the airs this man gave himself.

Overworked, he felt more irritable than his wont, and he knew he should not be able to endure patiently that amiable mental rasping in which Mr. Rodewald seemed inclined to indulge.

"I have been foolish to bear it so long," he considered drearily, walking with his own sad thoughts for company adown the pleasant garden, his back turned to the house, where the children were lying in their little white-curtained rooms.

"Smith !"

It was Mr. Rodewald who spoke, and made him start, so suddenly and softly had he come close to him over the moss-grown path. "What a touchy fellow you are !" and Mr. Rodewald put his hand on the other's shoulder almost affectionately. "What in the world has come to you ? Don't let us quarrel. Of all people, surely you and I ought to be the last to quarrel."

"I don't want to quarrel unless you force a quarrel upon me," answered Mr. Smith, standing quite stiff and self-asserting under the moonlight.

"The last thing on earth I desire to force on you or any other man, and that you ought to know," said Mr. Rodewald briskly, and then he waited for a reply.

Finding none came, however, that Mr. Smith usually glib enough and ready enough, with an acquiescence or a retort, remained resolutely mute, he proceeded,

"You wanted to know about View Water. It is that lovely place half-way between Thamesford and Hampsfield. The grounds, as you know, slope down to the river. Don't you recollect a house with a wide verandah, and French windows opening on to the lawn, that you stopped to admire the first time we ever walked along the towing-bank together ?"

"Yes, I recollect it," confessed Mr. Smith, reluctantly.

"Well, Mr. Posinby lives there."

"Supposing he does, what then ?"

"Why, then—don't you see, can't you see ?" Mr. Rodewald began impetuously ; but in a moment checking himself, he added reproachfully, "it is of no use talking to you in your present mood, Smith. I see that plainly."

Thereupon Mr. Smith's mood changed, and he began to laugh.

"Fact is, Rodewald," he said, "you ask sympathy from a man on the subject of these Posinbys who does not care whether they are living or dead, newly born or recently buried ; but I will try to sympathise with your desire to profit by the lucky chance which has brought Mrs. Posinby and her ankle to your house. I played into your hands, Rodewald, if you remember, though indeed out of the purest charity, since I did not then know who the lady was or how little chanced to be the matter with her. You should have followed my lead and insisted upon her remaining at The Snuggery.

"I am not quite so sure of that," said Mr. Rodewald, musingly, although indeed he had never felt more sure of anything in his life, "and at all events you know that woman who is with her declared positively she could not stop. The question now is, what are we to do?"

"You ought to take your lead from the lady-in-waiting, whom you so profanely indicate as 'that woman.' What does she wish you to do?"

"That," answered Mr. Rodewald, "it would almost require a conjuror to say. She chops and changes about till it is well-nigh impossible to make head or tail of what she means. One minute she wants 'our doctor' sent for from Thamesford; the next, she thinks if I would allow 'one of your servants' to go for a fly; and the third she wrings her hands, and says, 'O, dear, I *never* felt so perplexed and miserable in all my life before!'"

"But the carriage," suggested Mr. Smith—"that at least is a fact, I suppose?"

"O yes, that is a fact; but the difficulty about it seems to be that, though at View Water there are several conveyances, there is but one coachman, and he and the only other person about the place who can drive, except Mr. Posinby himself, have gone off, horses, carriages, and all, to meet Mr. Posinby at Heatherheath Station. So far as I can understand, they may have to wait there for hours—and, meantime, here is the lady."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Smith, "she also is a certainty; here is the lady."

"Then if I go for a fly, I may not be able to procure one. There is a great party on to-night at De Field's, and ten to one there won't be a disengaged conveyance in

Reedbourne. Like Miss Wickenden, I feel woefully perplexed."

Mr. Smith plunged his hands deep in his pockets.

"Now, Rodewald," he said, "I am going to give you a hint for which I hope you will feel truly grateful. Drive the lady home yourself. There is that trap which you exhibited to me with so much just pride this evening. There is the pony, docile as an old sheep. We can put a footstool in so as to raise the injured ankle, and make Mrs. Posinby as comfortable as if she were in one of the View Water chariots."

"But the phaeton only holds two," objected Mr. Rodewald. "Miss Wickenden could not perch in the little seat behind, as Annie does."

"Mrs. Posinby can surely dispense with her agreeable society for so short a time, and out of common decency she must feel grateful for the trouble to which you put yourself. Miss Wickenden probably, under such exceptional circumstances, will waive that strict propriety of conduct she no doubt generally observes, and confide her fair self to my charge. We shall have a charming walk under the moonlight. Go and suggest harnessing the fiery steed, Rodewald. If I am not greatly mistaken, both ladies will jump at the proposal."

But Mr. Smith chanced to be mistaken. Neither lady was made of the stuff which boldly jumps at anything. Mrs. Posinby murmured something about Mr. Rodewald being "*too* kind," "*too* considerate," and then asked Miss Wickenden, "What do you think, dear?"

Thus appealed to, the "dear" smiled and simpered, and said she was sure she did not know what to say. After having made this statement, she proceeded at once to contradict it by saying a great deal. She went over all the ground previously travelled for Mr. Rodewald's benefit once again. She wondered whether Mr. Posinby had returned or whether he would return. She speculated, in the event of his having returned, whether the carriage might not already have been despatched to Miss Mercer's in search of them. Then she lost herself in conjectures as to which carriage would be easiest for Ethel. Afterwards she concluded it might perhaps be safer to send for a fly; and finally she finished as she had begun, by declaring the

problem propounded too difficult for solution, she did "not know what to say."

"I think you had better, then, let us cut the knot for you," suggested Mr. Smith. "Is it really impossible for you and Mrs. Posinby to remain here until to-morrow morning, supposing a message be sent to View Water explaining where you are and what has happened?"

On this point, if upon no other, Miss Wickenden felt positive:

"Mrs. Posinby could not remain."

"Well, then, if I were you, Rodewald, I should put the pony in at once."

"Really?"

"Really, I think these ladies cannot do better than trust to you to do the very best in your power for them under the circumstances."

"They may be, indeed, quite certain I shall do that," answered Mr. Rodewald.

"The matter is decided, then. You drive Mrs. Posinby home."

Immediately the matter was thus settled for them the ladies became, not merely tranquil, but thankful; and while Mr. Rodewald went ostensibly to have "the horse put in," but really to perform that duty for himself, they were fervent in their expressions of gratitude for the kindness shown.

Miss Wickenden especially was very gushing concerning Mr. Smith's goodness in offering to walk with her all that long way home.

"It will be quite romantic," she declared, "crossing the ferry by moonlight. That reach of the river just by Thamesford is simply lovely, but no doubt you know it well. Gentlemen always do know so much more about a neighbourhood than ladies. We drive too much, and it is a pity, for walking is a much more healthful exercise. I have no doubt you think so too."

"Well, yes," agreed Mr. Smith, "one must do that, I suppose, remembering that driving is no exercise at all."

"And we can call on our doctor as we pass through Thamesford, and ask him to come on at once to View Water. It will not take us three minutes out of our way—it will not indeed," said Miss Wickenden, eagerly, as though

she imagined Mr. Smith might offer some violent objection to her plan. "Will it, Ethel dear?"

No, Ethel said, she did not think it would, but she felt shocked to consider the inconvenience to which she was putting every one; whereupon Mr. Smith hastened to assure her he should enjoy a walk on such a lovely night, and that he was only too happy to be able to be of the slightest service to her or her friend; then, feeling he was growing somewhat tired of the iteration of pretty phrases and sweet speeches, he remarked that he would go and see if the phaeton was at the door, and by virtue of this excuse left the visitors alone with Miss Lydney.

To get out of that atmosphere of conventionality and affectation was to him like passing from a stifling room loaded with heavy perfumes, into the pure grateful cold of a clear bracing day.

"How can men live with women of that kind and keep their senses!" he marvelled as he strode off towards the yard, where Mr. Rodewald stood bareheaded, struggling to harness the pony—an operation in which he seemed a little less at home than might have been the case had some one asked him to amputate an arm.

"Can I be of any use?" asked Mr. Smith, advancing in the moonlight; "the pony seems a trifle restive."

"Restive!" repeated Mr. Rodewald, in a tone of the direst contempt for his friend's poor verbal assortment. "He won't stand still a minute. I cannot think what is the matter with him."

"What are you trying to do?" asked the other.

"I want to get this on," explained Mr. Rodewald. "How does the confounded thing fit? How the deuce is one to thrust that over a horse's head?"

"Let me try," said Mr. Smith; and in a trice he had the collar on the pony's neck, and was patting the animal, who stood steady enough under more efficient handling.

"O, that is how you do it, is it?" remarked Mr. Rodewald; "seems easy enough when you turn it upside down."

"Yes, quite easy," agreed Mr. Smith, finishing that small harnessing matter, of which his host evidently knew nothing. "Let me back him into the shafts—so, so; quiet, my man. Should you like me to drive Mrs. Posinby home, Rodewald?"

"Certainly not," was the decisive reply. "Why should I wish you to drive her?"

"O, I didn't know—I thought perhaps you might enjoy a *tête-à-tête* and walk by moonlight with Miss Wickenden."

"Don't be absurd!" entreated Mr. Rodewald.

"Such an opportunity may never again present itself," persisted Mr. Smith, taking St. George—so the pony was modestly called—by the head and leading him gently in the way he should go.

"Then make the most of it," retorted Mr. Rodewald, whose self-pride had been very sorely galled by his friend's offer. "If you imagine because I am not quite as *au fait* at harnessing a horse as any stable-helper, that I cannot drive one, you are very much mistaken."

"He is a nice little pony," said Mr. Smith, discreetly begging the question at issue, "and I daresay can go. Will he stand, or shall we ask Miss Lydney to hold him while we carry out Mrs. Posinby?"

"He'll stand right enough," answered Mr. Rodewald, sulkily.

St. George, however, did not seem at all disposed to stand, and Miss Lydney's services were accordingly pressed into the service.

"What a heavenly night!" exclaimed Miss Wickenden, as she put one corner of a rug over her friend. "Dear Ethel, how anxious I shall be till I see you safe home! And O! how are we ever to thank these gentlemen sufficiently for their kindness? Is the foot comfortable, love? You are certain you will not be cold? Well, then, *good-bye* for the present; we shall of course reach View Water before you can get there. Poor darling, what a drive it is for you?"

"Open the gate, will you, Smith?" asked Mr. Rodewald, with some asperity, cutting short these amenities. "Now, Mrs. Posinby, if you are quite ready!"

"Heaven send," thought Mr. Smith, as he stood looking up the dusty road stretching away white under the moonlight, "the steed understands his work better than his master, or else Mrs. Posinby may chance to go home with a broken neck as well as a sprained ankle. And now for the fair Wickenden."

CHAPTER XX.

TÊTE-À-TÊTE.

"THERE is no necessity for us to hurry," remarked that fascinating enslaver, as Mr. Smith, with natural, if ungallant, haste, began striding along towards Thamesford ferry as though shod with seven-league boots. "It will take them a considerable time to drive round by Hampsfield, as they must do perforce, more particular with that dear tiny little pony. I can't tell you how kind I think it was of you to offer to come all this weary distance with me. I only wish it were in my power to prove my gratitude."

"You can, madam," answered Mr. Smith, with startling emphasis.

"In what way?—pray command me," she exclaimed.

"By saying not another word about the matter," he answered.

"How ready! how gallant!" Miss Wickenden murmured, in a rapturous *sotto voce*. "O, what a night," she continued, "now confess you consider it too lovely."

"It is a nice sort of night," agreed Mr. Smith, speaking critically, as though he were reviewing it.

"I am afraid you are not poetical," she suggested.

"No one ever accused me of being so."

It is hard work for even the most romantic lady who ever stepped unwillingly across the threshold of middle age to keep up a conversation of this sort with an unromantic swain, and accordingly, after a pensive little sigh, Miss Wickenden abandoned the endeavour, and betook herself to other themes.

"You know View Water well, I suppose?" she began, feeling her way delicately.

"I have never been in the grounds," he answered, "but I have seen them from this side of the river. It seems a very nice place."

"A dream property!" she ejaculated; "it is beautiful as a nook in fairyland. We have not been there long. Up to the time of his death Mrs. Posinby's father—Mr. Harridge—resided at View Water, and, except for a flying visit, we rarely came down."

Mr. Smith inclined his head in acknowledgment of these confidences. It was kind of the lady to make them, but naturally he did not feel the same interest in the Harridge-Posinby arrangements as the persons composing those households.

"No; we were here but seldom," proceeded Miss Wickenden; "towards the last it was very painful for Ethel (Mrs. Posinby) to come at all. The old man was a sad object; he had softening of the brain, and palsy, and was paralysed, and, O dear, I am sure I could not tell you one half the diseases with which he was afflicted. Sad does not it seem? and he had everything money could buy! Everything, poor man! But money cannot buy health."

This was happily so obviously true a statement that Mr. Smith felt safe in saying that "indeed it could not."

"Ah, I felt you would agree with me!" recommenced the lady. "I have the most wonderful intuition about people. Sometimes, do you know, it quite frightens me. I go into a room full of company—full of persons who are total strangers to me—and I can tell in an instant which of them I shall find sympathetic and which antagonistic. Ethel is often quite amused. "Show me your latest affinity," she frequently says, and I assure you I am never wrong—my instinct never deceives me. The moment I heard your voice this evening I felt I trusted it; I felt your nature was in accord with mine. Strange, was not it?"

It seemed to Mr. Smith not merely so strange, but so terrible, that he could only receive the news in grim silence, which the lady, perhaps, mistook for pleasure, as she proceeded almost without a break:

"Now there is Ethel's husband; between him and myself there has always been what I may call a sort of repulsion; that is a strong word to use, but it is not too strong. We exercise a kind of centrifugal power upon each other; don't laugh please, Mr. Smith," for, indeed, Mr. Smith was laughing at his own thoughts; "it is a positive and lamentable fact. If I know him to be in the drawing-room, for instance, I go into the library; and if he sees me in the garden, he at once walks into the shrubbery."

"That must be awkward, living under the same roof," hazarded her companion, feeling he was expected to say something.

"Most awkward—dear me, how troublesome these stiles are! O, *thank* you! As I was saying," continued Miss Wickenden, after the short diversion caused by having to surmount a stout fence imperfectly furnished with a rickety step—"as I was saying," she proceeded, ambling along the field-path, while Mr. Smith walked on the grass, "Mr. Posinby and I cannot get fond of each other. Strange, is it not? for he is a general favourite, and I—I do not think I am *very* disagreeable."

As she paused for a reply, Mr. Smith had no option save to murmur,

"Quite the contrary."

"You would scarcely believe it," said Miss Wickenden, "but sometimes he is absolutely rude to me. The other day he actually referred to me as a cat—as a *cat*, Mr. Smith, I assure you. I said to him quietly—I try always to be quiet, even under the greatest provocation: 'Mr. Posinby, you forget both what is due to me and to yourself. Were it not for the love and affection I feel for your dear wife I should leave the house.'"

Miss Wickenden stopped, evidently expecting Mr. Smith to ask what the unappreciative Mr. Posinby thought of this remark; but finding her companion would not lead up to the desired point, she was forced to make it for herself.

"And then," added Miss Wickenden, "instead of apologising—instead, even if he were ashamed to do that, of maintaining silence—he said, 'I only wish you would!' Think of it, Mr. Smith—I, who have been to his wife more than any sister."

She was so visibly affected that Mr. Smith felt constrained to entreat she would not think any more about it—that she would endeavour to dismiss so painful a subject from her mind.

"I am very foolish, I know," she confessed, applying her handkerchief to her eyes, "but I feel it all so terribly for poor Ethel. Dear me! where is the path? What a poor weak creature you must consider me, Mr. Smith!"

Whether he did or not, Mr. Smith was obliged to offer her his arm.

Hitherto he had hoped such an attention might be dispensed with; but as Miss Wickenden, busy with her wrongs, her tears, and her handkerchief, showed evident signs of

straying from the beaten way, slipping into drains, and otherwise disregarding the small perils of their route, no choice remained save to rush to her rescue by tendering such polite service as he had at command.

Before they reached the ferry Mr. Smith was in possession of Mrs. Posinby's history.

"An only child, an elderly father's darling," to quote the narrator, "she caught Mr. Posinby's fancy on the rebound."

"Why," exclaimed Miss Wickenden, "such a fate should have been reserved for her, Heaven only knows; there are many, very many things in this world which seem to me simply unintelligible. Ah, I knew you would agree with me!" she added, as Mr. Smith muttered some remark signifying he was not at all astonished at that.

The lady who had reigned supreme in Mr. Posinby's heart jilted or rejected him (Miss Wickenden's history, like many a better one, was furnished with such copious notes that it frequently became obscure, not to say incoherent); and, while still smarting under the indignity, he chanced to become acquainted with Mr. Harridge.

No one could accuse Miss Wickenden of undue reticence, when the antecedents of friends formed the theme of her discourse; and accordingly, ere long, Mr. Smith learned that, although Mr. Harridge "was as good as gold"—"one of Nature's nobility"—and "liberal as a prince," the world never regarded him "quite as—a—well, as what is conventionally called a gentleman."

"He had risen," confessed Miss Wickenden, with a sigh, "and, like all persons who have risen, he perhaps overrated the social position of those who—who—"

"Have not risen," suggested Mr. Smith.

"I daresay we mean the same thing," she replied, "though you have not exactly caught the phrase which has eluded me. Poor dear man, he fancied if he could only secure a husband for his daughter, born in the purple, if I may so express myself, and possessing the *entrée* to great houses, he should have nothing left to wish for. Who was that clever creature who said something about our 'making whips to scourge ourselves'? But no matter; I only mentioned it because it seemed to me so applicable to poor Mr. Harridge. Kind old soul, he knotted quite a cat-

nine-tails for his back when he began to ask Mr. Posinby to the house."

Once again Miss Wickenden paused, and once again Mr. Smith asked no question.

With his face graver than ever, his eyes looking straight before him, his arm at the lady's service merely as a piece of wood might have been, and his loose stride accommodating itself with difficulty to his companion's mincing walk, he looked as unlike a person desirous of listening to a confidence as can well be imagined.

In fact he hated his companion's chatter, and, if he had known how to stop it without absolute discourtesy, would have requested Miss Wickenden to tell him nothing further concerning Mrs. and Mr. Posinby.

Some vague idea of this fact seemed to occur to Miss Wickenden, for she said,

"I fear my story wearies you."

"Not at all," he answered; "but you must remember that I am a total stranger to your friends and their affairs."

This he said with some emphasis, hoping she might take the hint he desired to convey.

"That is very true," answered Miss Wickenden, "and yet I do not think the greatest stranger could avoid feeling interested in Mrs. Posinby. You see her now, gentle, amiable, beautiful, delicate, and you think how charming she is, but you can never imagine what she was as a girl. I have known her all her life, I may say. Really, I am a few years her senior, though no one looking at her poor worn face would imagine the fact.

"We were at school together," she hurried on, almost without a pause, finding Mr. Smith once again mute, "and formed a friendship from the first, though our condition was scarcely equal. *I*," proceeded the lady, "was poor—she was rich; *my* parents had gone down in the world—her parents had risen; *I* was in an inferior position—she was in a superior; *I* was a despised teacher—she a flattered heiress; yet we formed an enduring friendship."

At this juncture Mr. Smith managed to utter a few words signifying that such a friendship was creditable to both parties; and, thus encouraged, Miss Wickenden proceeded to tell how, when dear Ethel left school for good, her kind generous father asked her—the despised teacher—to come

and take up her home at View Water. A paradise she described that place—a perfect paradise, till Mr. Posinby, in an evil hour, made his appearance in the English Eden.

"The old man's vanity was flattered; Ethel fell in love, Mr. Posinby and she married. Mr. Harridge paid his son-in-law's debts, and made the young couple a handsome allowance; and, though things did not proceed very happily, they at least proceeded decently until poor Mr. Harridge was attacked with the illness which left him imbecile. Then, when it was quite certain whatever disposition he had made of his property could never be altered, Ethel's husband cast all restraint to the wind. I could not tell you, Mr. Smith, how he behaved."

"Pray do not try," entreated Mr. Smith, alarmed.

"I may say he began to live on racecourses, and to herd with the lowest of mankind," proceeded Miss Wickenden, determinedly.

"And Mr. Harridge, did he live long?" asked Mr. Smith, trying to change the subject.

"Yes, poor soul, he did, a sort of death in life; but at last we were sent for all in a hurry. He was gone; and Mr. Posinby, though he tried to veil his real feelings under a mask, walked about View Water thinking, I know, he would have the ball at his feet."

"And he found he had not, I suppose?" conjectured Mr. Smith; there was a shrewish bitterness in Miss Wickenden's speech which, for the moment, really aroused his curiosity.

"You are right," said the lady. "Ethel was not so destitute of friends as he supposed. He might have hoodwinked her, but he could not hoodwink those who had her interest at heart. Civility is cheap, Mr. Smith, but people forget that sometimes when the memory might be useful, and remember it when too late."

"A very true remark," observed Mr. Smith.

"When the will came to be read," proceeded Miss Wickenden, "Mr. Posinby found that not one shilling of Mr. Harridge's money was left at his disposal. More than that, Mrs. Posinby has merely a life interest in the property. If she have no children, everything goes to a distant relative who wished to marry her and whom she refused."

"And are there any children?"

"No—not any."

"And Mr. Posinby is, I presume, dependent on his wife?"

"Totally dependent; but you need not pity him," added Miss Wickenden, noticing the "Poor devil!" expression on Mr. Smith's face. "He has the cream of everything; he is master if she is heiress; he rules if she reigns. Ethel is gentleness personified; she would do anything on earth he asked her; if it were in her power to beggar herself she would gladly do it to please him. Necessary as I am to her, she would, even at his bidding, get rid of me if she could."

"This household is one that will suit Rodewald," thought Mr. Smith, but he merely strode on in solemn silence, dragging Miss Wickenden after him.

"Might we—could we," she gasped, "walk a little slower? I assure you, Mr. Smith, we shall be at View Water hours before the carriage."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Smith. "I am so accustomed to walk alone, I quite forgot—that is—I really am very sorry."

"You are kindness itself," answered Miss Wickenden, leaning a little on the arm she held; "ah, all men are not like Mr. Posinby. I assure you, I believe if I were sinking in a morass, he would not stretch out a finger to save me. Sometimes I think he would be glad if I were dead! After all, it cannot be pleasant, regarding a woman as an incubus, to feel one is saddled with her for life; and Mr. Posinby is saddled with me. I am to remain with Ethel always, unless I leave her of my own free will. That is the bitter drop, Mr. Smith; that is why Mr. Posinby hates me."

"Here is the ferry," said Mr. Smith, quite relieved, "and there is the boat. Hold on!" he shouted at the pitch of his voice; and the ferryman, who was just putting off, backed to shore.

"We are fortunate," observed Mr. Smith, gravely, as he assisted his companion into the punt; and, although Miss Wickenden would not have objected to the distance being greater, she simpered, "O, yes, so fortunate!" and then began to remark on the beauty of the night.

But her companion scarcely heard her. With arms folded across his chest, he was standing looking at the

such an hour and under simi-
tastic beauty so enchained hi-
den's gushing observations fa-

"It is lovely," he thought;
the shore, he turned and walk-

If any one had asked hi-
whether he was thinking of hi-
that reach of the Thames by 1

"You will not mind our ju-
said Miss Wickenden.

"It is better that we should

By what seemed to Mr. Sn-
Merton was not only at hom-
garden as they approached.

"*Can* you come up to the
Wickenden, after she had to
accident and mentioned Mr.
remarked coquettishly upon th-
have caused Mr. Smith.

"Certainly," answered the
companion's face the while he
diately; in fact, if you can wa-
with you now."

"O, we can't stop, we can-
Wickenden, alarmed for the ch-

"Very well, then," he agree-
Smith disgusting readiness.

nevertheless, of a merry eye ; and when he came up to Miss Wickenden and her companion, and without ceremony tucked the lady's hand under his arm, he turned that merry eye towards Mr. Smith, and so informed him he understood and enjoyed the position.

"My dear lady," he said to Miss Wickenden, "you are degenerating sadly : you have forgotten how to walk and learned how to dawdle ; you and I must go out for some of those constitUTIONALS we found so beneficial in Mr. Harridge's time. Do you remember how you used to complain of my racing you along ?"

"And so you did, doctor," she answered. "It was not walking, but racing."

"And now tell me all about this sprain over again," he entreated. "You were too much flurried and excited just now to give me a clear idea of how the accident occurred."

No request could have been more judicious. Delighted to fight her battles once more, Miss Wickenden repeated the story with much fuller details, and with various addenda impossible for her to relate as she stood at his garden gate, the while she was longing to ramble off alone with Mr. Smith.

Now that the hoped-for *tête-à-tête* was impossible, she made a very good virtue indeed of necessity. She began at the beginning, indeed before the beginning, and added many things on to the end.

"I think," remarked Dr. Merton gravely, as they neared the house, "I understand all about it now ; but should there be anything you have left untold, Miss Wickenden, you can mention it to me when it occurs to you."

And Miss Wickenden said she would. Five minutes later, having ascertained that Mrs. Posinby had not yet returned, the lady was busy as a bee, on hospitable thoughts intent.

Mr. Smith and the doctor must have something to eat. Almost with tears she entreated that at least a tray might be brought up.

"I could not touch a morsel, thank you," declared the doctor.

"Nor could I," added Mr. Smith.

"Then you must have a glass of wine and a biscuit ;" but the doctor said he would rather not have any ; and once again Mr. Smith was of his opinion.

"I think I'll take a stroll along the walk beside the river till Mrs. Posinby arrives," suggested Dr. Merton, after he had declined all Miss Wickenden's offers of food and drink. "Perhaps you would like to come too," he continued, turning towards Mr. Smith. "It is close indoors to-night, I fancy."

"I should like it of all things," said Mr. Smith.

"Come along, then," cried the doctor; and the two men went out into the moonlight together.

It was a lovely place—lovely seen from the opposite bank, but seeming more beautiful still when the visitors sauntered beside beds of roses, through arches of honeysuckle, and over closely-mown lawns down to the silvery Thames.

"We can sit here," said Dr. Merton, pointing to a rustic bench under a gigantic black poplar tree. "This point, I think, commands the best view of the river to be had from the grounds."

"You seem to know your way pretty well about the place," remarked Mr. Smith.

"I ought to do so, at any rate. I am here most days."

"Mrs. Posinby looks delicate."

"Well, it is not always Mrs. Posinby: sometimes it is Miss Wickenden; and if it is not Miss Wickenden or Mrs. Posinby, or both together, it is Mr. Posinby; or if it is not any or all of the three, it is one of the servants. Bless you, it is a wonderful house for illness!"

"Not healthy?" said Mr. Smith, inquiringly.

"O, it is healthy enough. When people are so inclined, it is almost as easy to be sick in one place as another. I suppose the secret of it is, they have all plenty of time to be ill. There is a great deal in that. Being laid up is a luxury busy people can scarcely afford to indulge in. Posinby's ailments, however, do not proceed from inactivity—quite the contrary."

"I have never seen him," remarked Mr. Smith, whose tongue seemed loosened since his separation from the fascinating Wickenden.

"He is a good-looking fellow enough; a tall, straight, well-made man, with a devil-may-care kind of expression in his face. I can remember him as handsome a young chap as I suppose you ever set eyes on—that was when he came

here first. But he has gone a pace since those days. My word! yes. To keep up with him, a person would need to ride fast and to ride far."

"Extravagant?"

"Too mild a word," corrected the doctor. "Mad, sir, quite mad in his particular line. Took the bit between his teeth years ago, and bolted for ruin, and has been going there as hard as he could gallop ever since. Old Harridge thought he made a very good stroke when he booked him for Miss Ethel, which only shows what foolish things a clever man can do on occasion."

"Was Mr. Harridge clever, then?"

"Wonderfully clever—wonderfully; as clear-headed and astute an individual as you could find between this and London. Why, you may know that in his own particular line, which was money-making, he must have been something out of the common, when I tell you he began life as boy in a pawnbroker's shop, and when he died he left this place and ten thousand a year behind him to Posinby, but not the handling of sixpence of the money—legally, I mean. So far as she is able, Mrs. Posinby lets him have pretty much his own way. It is a queer household. You'd say that if you saw as much of it as I do."

"Shall we return to the house?" asked Mr. Smith.

"Do you wish to go in?"

"No; but Mrs. Posinby will be coming back, and my friend may require assistance."

"Let some of the men help, then—parcel of lazy beggars; it will do them good to have to hurry about a little. By the bye, what is your name, sir? I did not quite catch it when Miss Wickenden introduced us."

"Smith."

"O, indeed!" said the doctor, as if pleased to make the acquaintance of any gentleman possessed of so distinctive a cognomen. "And where did she tell me you ved?"

"I don't think she told you, for the sufficient reason that she does not know herself. I reside in chambers in London, but happened this evening to be staying with Mr. Rodewald, who has a little place called The Snuggery at Reedbourne, not a great way from the ferry at Thamesford."

"What! the cottage where Turtle used to reside?" exclaimed the doctor.

"Have not the faintest idea whether he did or not. Mr. Rodewald rents the house from a Mr. Cheverley."

"Cheverley—Cheverley!" repeated the doctor. "Yes, I have heard that name. O, I know—a spare, shy-looking man, who seemed afraid of anybody speaking to him. Walked about a good deal, and always carried a book. Was reading for everlasting. Granton knew him; I have seen them together. Your friend is the foreigner, then, I suppose? O yes, I know The Snuggery, as Turtle renamed it, very well indeed. The place used to be called Reed Cottage. We must be moving now, I suppose. There is Miss Wickenden wanting to know our whereabouts."

And rising stiffly and reluctantly, Dr. Merton walked forward to meet Miss Wickenden, who, with a handkerchief tied coquettishly over her head, came tripping across the moonlit lawn to inform them Mrs. Posinby and Mr. Rodewald had arrived.

"Is Mr. Posinby back?" asked the doctor, as they walked three abreast towards the house, along the walk that wound beside the river.

For answer Miss Wickenden pursed up her mouth and shook her head.

"It is just as well he has not returned," remarked Dr. Merton, philosophically.

As they neared the hall-door Mr. Smith's quick sight observed that St. George, left for a minute to his own devices, had seized the opportunity of advancing upon an arch of honeysuckle, which he was demolishing with unpoetical appetite.

"Ay, that's always the way here," remarked Dr. Merton, in a tone of perfect conviction. "There's never a creature to look after anything, and yet one cannot stir a step without tumbling over a servant. Tie him up to the scraper, or one of the pillars, or anything."

"I will stay with him," answered Mr. Smith; "there is no necessity for me to go in."

And to this decision Mr. Smith adhered, in spite of Dr. Merton's bluff,

"Nonsense, man! come along;" and Miss Wickenden's,

"You really must—really, though, you must. Mrs. Posinby will be quite vexed, I assure you."

A few minutes later, Mr. Rodewald, coming all in a hurry down the steps, found his friend standing stroking St. George's neck and looking idly up at the sky.

"I could not think where you had got to, Smith," he said.

"I have not been far away either," was the reply. "Are you ready now?"

"Yes, quite. Miss Wickenden and the doctor, and indeed Mrs. Posinby herself, were very anxious for us to finish our interrupted supper here, but I thought it better to refuse."

"Much better," agreed Mr. Smith.

"Would you mind taking the reins going back?" asked Mr. Rodewald, "I want to smoke."

"I will drive if you like," agreed the other, amused not merely by the request, but by the reason given for making it. "Our dear friend has had some rough weather with St. George on the way over here," he considered; but he only said aloud, "Nice place this, Rodewald."

"Beautiful," was the answer. "And what did you and your companion find to say to each other?"

"She did all the talking, and did it very foolishly, as you may imagine."

"Ah! she is a very different sort of person from Mrs. Posinby."

"I do not fancy either of them is burdened with a superfluity of sense," answered Mr. Smith.

By this time Mr. Rodewald had got his pipe well alight, and volunteered no further observation.

But he kept his eye on Mr. Smith, as that gentleman instructed St. George in the way he wished him to go, and restrained several manifestations of self-will in which the animal seemed disposed to indulge.

"He is a little troublesome, is he not?" said Mr. Rodewald, after one of those encounters.

"O, no; the pony is docile enough, but he has been badly driven, I think."

A remark perfectly innocent in itself, and uttered without the slightest intention of giving offence.

Nevertheless, Mr. Rodewald, regarding it as a personal

affront, treasured the utterance in his memory, and never forgot and never forgave it.

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. SMITH ACTS ON IMPULSE.

"It is of no use arguing ; nothing will induce me to go."

Mr. Smith, sitting in the sacred retirement of his chambers, was the speaker, and Mr. Rodewald, an unwelcome intruder upon his privacy, was vainly urging him to reconsider his refusal.

"Come," he said, "don't be churlish. I have gone out of my way before now for you, and you might consider me a little. It could not do you any harm, and it would do me some good."

"I do not see how it could benefit you," was the reply ; "and it would be most disagreeable to me. I am not 'a company man,' as you know, and a dinner-party of that sort bores me to death."

"What do you mean by 'that sort'?" asked Mr. Rodewald, up in arms at once. "Some of the best people in the neighbourhood will be there."

"My dear fellow, don't you know that the 'best people' of any neighbourhood are my especial abhorrence? your friend De Field, for instance."

"My friend De Field! No, thank you; he is no friend of mine, as I mean to teach him the first opportunity."

Mr. Smith looked at the speaker somewhat curiously, but asked no questions. Dawdling with his paper-knife, he continued:

"Well, friend or enemy, I suppose we may take him as the typical best man of Reedbourne. The tradespeople worship him, the porters grovel before him, the station-master defers to him, the clergy regard him as *the* rich camel who can certainly pass through the eye of a needle. His progress through your pastoral neighbourhood is a kind of royal procession. All very nice in its way—very proper, and so forth; but I ask you what could De Field do for me. I am quite sure he would not settle an annuity upon

me. He could not amuse me, I know. There is a broad gulf fixed, Rodewald, between me and people who own shares and keep big balances at their bankers', and any attempt to cross it only results in the most signal failure. No, it is very kind of the Posinbys to ask me to their house, and it is very good of you to wish me to go, but I cannot do it."

"I must say I think you are throwing away your chances."

Mr. Smith laughed and pointed to a pile of paper on the table.

"There lies my chances," he answered. "Each page I blot of that means so much money. If, like the lady in the fairy tale, each time I opened my mouth I dropped rubies and pearls, then indeed there might be reason in your remark, but as matters are there is none."

"Then you will not help me?"

"Help you, Rodewald! If I were to do what you ask, I should only get you into some horrible mess."

"No, you would not. I want some one who can give these big folks as good as they bring; who would show them money is not everything. When I am among them I seem tongue-tied. I think afterwards of lots of smart and telling things I might have said, but then it is a little too late."

"They carry too many guns for you?" remarked Mr. Smith, regarding his visitor with a certain interest.

"Yes, I confess the fact, and I cannot cut in as you would do."

"I am sorry for it—sorry, that is, I am unable to oblige you in this matter; but I assure you I should do you discredit rather than honour. Nature never intended me to sit as a professional jester at rich men's tables, and the bitter of my tongue is not that of olives, which adds piquancy to the flavour of wine."

"Then I may tell Posinby you refuse his hospitality?"

"You can tell Mr. Posinby I distinctly refuse to marry the charming Wickenden, which is the service I imagine he requires at my hands."

"You might do worse. The old man left her a thousand pounds; and she has at least double that amount now."

"I fancy I am worth more than two thousand pounds," remarked Mr. Smith, thoughtfully.

"It would rid you of all your creditors.

"Ay, but it would saddle me with a wife."

"A wife would be the making of you."

"Perhaps. At the moment I do not agree with you ; but I can think the matter over, and, if I see my way to oblige Mr. Posinby, will not fail to let you know."

"You do not seem in a good temper this morning, Smith, and I may as well go. I suppose you will be ready for the twenty-fourth ?"

"I hope to be so," answered Mr. Smith ; and Mr. Rodewald departed.

"He proposes helping that Posinby blandly and tenderly along the road to ruin, doubtless," soliloquised Mr. Smith, pulling a manuscript towards him and dipping his pen in the ink. "Luckily it is no business of mine ; and if it were, I conclude it does not much matter in whose company the son-in-law of the deceased Mr. Harridge travels the well-beaten highway. Upon the whole, I think I like Mr. Posinby. He is such an out-and-out sinner, just as Rodewald is such an out-and-out rogue. Heavens ! how he has improved his opportunities there ! Six weeks ago, ignorant that such people existed ; to-day, the friend of the family ; consulted by the husband, confided in by the wife, trusted by the companion, deferred to by the servants, an honoured guest at View Water, hand and glove with the doctor, a favourite with the Thamesford clergyman. Certainly he deserves success, for he works hard enough to attain it.

Yes, it was quite true ; Mr. Rodewald had done all Mr. Smith said, and more. He had not only established himself at View Water, but he was beginning to be a power at Reedbourne.

People who had thought so little of Mr. Cheverley's tenant as to regard him merely as an intrusive foreigner asked each other the name of the gentleman who seemed so intimate with Mr. Posinby.

The fact of Mr. Posinby being an out-and-out sinner did not neutralise the fact of his being a cousin of Lord Metendalis, and the husband of a woman who brought him ten thousand a year. Nay, rather his evil character gave an additional zest to the extraordinary friendship he had struck up with Mr. Rodewald.

As for the Reedbourne tradespeople, they became not merely respectful, but confidential, taking various opportunities of deferentially asking Mr. Rodewald's opinion about several small matters in which he was by no means too big a man to interest himself.

"It all means power," he was good enough to explain one day to Mr. Smith, when that individual marvelled how he could listen with patience to the petty details of some fraudulent bankruptcy which was exercising the minds of the local wiseacres. "Why, there are lots of people about here who hold their heads high enough, and who have tried to snub *me*, down in the smeared and blotted books of the pettiest tradesmen for amounts that would astonish you."

"Of course, if this sort of thing interests you," remarked his confidant, "there is nothing more to be said. All I know is, it would not interest me."

"Perhaps you would be more prosperous if it did," retorted Mr. Rodewald; and as his own worldly position was too bad to be disputed, Mr. Smith had as usual to bow his head under the superiority of the man who appraised him.

"He will do all I told Cheverley he would accomplish, and far more," considered Mr. Smith. "The year is not up yet, and he has already set his mark on Reedbourne. When he has got half the parish by the ears, and himself constituted father confessor to the neighbourhood, he will be a happy man."

But, as yet wanting something besides the two items indicated by his friend, Mr. Rodewald was not happy.

More than one Mordecai sat at his gate and stared him out of countenance.

There were still people, nay, there were many people, who as yet had stretched out no right hand of fellowship to the foreigner. There were still those who neither noticed him on the railway platform nor bade him good-day when he travelled in the same compartment with them. Mr. Rivers still "looked him over," as though he were a total stranger—as though he had never entered Reedbourne church, as though he had never given a farthing to the parish charities; while Mr. Grey's recognition of him, though constant, was fitful in its character—sometimes distant,

sometimes more cordial, but never what might be called flattering in its genial friendliness.

As to Mr. De Field—but at the very thought of that individual Mr. Rodewald felt his ire rise and master him. He—he was the influence which kept Reedbourne from frankly acknowledging there dwelt amongst its daisies and buttercups a man upon whose like that village might never look again. That “beast” Field—for so indeed Mr. Rodewald habitually styled his enemy—had passed from silent contempt to open warfare.

When Mr. Posinby invited him to dinner, he begged before accepting to know whether a fellow calling himself Rodewald was to be among the guests?

“Because if he is,” added Mr. De Field, tersely, “you must excuse me; you have a perfect right to choose your own acquaintances, Posinby, but I can’t let you choose mine.”

“A most pestilent and insolent fellow,” said Mr. De Field, when repeating the story subsequently.

Nor did Mr. De Field’s persecutions cease even at this point. When Mrs. Posinby invited Mr. Rodewald’s girls to a children’s party she had planned before she knew their father or sprained her ankle, Susie returned home almost broken-hearted because the mammas who were present had told their daughters not to be too friendly with her and Annie.

In the course of a day or two it oozed out, through the communicative Wickenden, that Mrs. De Field had stated Mr. Rodewald was a “common money-lender,” “a person whom really one *could* not know, my dear.”

“It is quite necessary to say I fought your brother-in-law’s battle, Miss Lydney; poor Ethel was quite concerned about what Mr. De Field said, and hoped she had not been too precipitate in forming Mr. Rodewald’s acquaintance. The darling, you must remember, was brought up to have an overweening respect for rank, and all that sort of thing; and, like every one who has no real position of her own, is always afraid of compromising herself.”

“But I soon reassured her. ‘Where,’ said I, ‘could you find more perfect gentlemen than Mr. Rodewald and his friend Mr. Smith? Only contrast the chivalrous respect of their manners with the almost contemptuous familiarity of that man De Field.’”

"Those were my very words, Miss Lydney; while as for Mr. Posinby—it is not very often he and I agree on any point, but he went with me, heart and soul in this—what he said was :

" 'So De Field is going to set himself up as a sort of licensing chamberlain for Reedbourne, is he? By——, he sha'n't have the chance at View Water!' a little profane, perhaps, but still it showed a right spirit. Now, that is just what I like about Mr. Posinby; he is thoroughbred; he is not to be influenced like poor dear Ethel; he is stanch as I am. When once he takes a fancy he is not to be turned from it by man, woman or child; and I am just the same: you will always find that in persons who have, to use a common expression, had a grandfather."

Miss Lydney listened and sighed. Perhaps, upon the whole, she thought The Snuggery had been a more comfortable residence when acquaintances possessed of grandfathers did not seek to know its inmates; but then, as Mr. Smith had told her, "it was written, it was Fate;" and what could she do except submit to the inevitable?

All this time, in town and out of it, Mr. Smith was working very hard, indeed, in order to be prepared for that twenty-fourth day of the month referred to by Mr. Rodewald.

Then another of those payments which had so long vexed his soul was due, and, strong in his desire to free himself from his friend's patronising exordiums, he laboured on, in town and out of town, to the end that he might be ready with the amount required.

On the twenty-first he was possessed of the sum needed; and as it would, he knew, be necessary for him to leave London for a few days before the twenty-fourth arrived, he made a journey into the City for the purpose of paying the money he had earned so hardly into Mr. Rodewald's hands.

It was a blazing hot day in August; the pavements seemed on fire, and the sun streamed straight into the City with a fine scorching heat, as though desirous of annihilating every living creature passing through the streets. But Mr. Smith did not mind the heat. Weather in any shape or form was a thing which troubled him very little indeed.

Rain, hail, sun, snow, wind, sleet—all seemed much the

same to him. No man ever heard him complain of the weather God sent, and, for that matter, no one ever heard him complain either of the evil fortune he had compassed for himself.

"It must ring to evensong some time," he occasionally murmured, when quite alone ; "and I hope when it does I shall have finished *all* my work."

On that particular twenty-first of August he did not chance to have much work in hand, and so he sauntered quite leisurely along the coolest side of the streets, and stopped now and then to look at anything which took his fancy in the shop-windows.

When he reached Mr. Rodewald's place of business he ascended the staircase slowly, thinking as he went of the many weary times he had fagged up those stairs with only money enough in his pocket to pay the interest due, both his pride and his reason revolting against the humble-pie he knew he would have to swallow before the interview ended.

The door of Mr. Rodewald's outer office stood ajar—as, or that matter, did the door of the inner office also—and Mr. Smith, perceiving that the usual boy was absent, walked across to the room labelled "Private," intending to announce himself.

But almost on the threshold he was stopped by the sound of voices.

Mr. Rodewald had a visitor, and Mr. Smith stepped back.

"Then you positively refuse to help him?" It was a woman who spoke—a woman whose voice sounded shrill, though not with passion.

"Yes, I am afraid I must, Mrs. Holway. There is nothing more useless than to try to help a doomed man—and your husband is doomed certainly. It is not in my power to assist you, because I am merely an agent in the affair ; but, if I could, I tell you candidly, I should not consider it kindness to aid in deferring the evil day. You see, each hour you seem to get deeper in the mire. Ever since I first had the pleasure of knowing you the same struggle has been going on, the same shifts have been resorted to. When a man gets hopelessly involved, as your husband evidently did years ago, there is only one thing his best *friend* can advise him to do, and that is to cut the knot of

his difficulties by meeting his creditors. Believe me, in Mr. Holway's case there is nothing else to be done."

Long before this speech was ended, Mr. Smith had retreated to the landing—indeed, to the very head of the stairs; but the distance was so small, and Mr. Rodewald's voice so distinct, he could not avoid hearing every word he uttered.

As a rule, confidential dialogues are not held with open doors; but still Mr. Smith was debating within himself whether he had not better descend to the next landing, when a question put by Mrs. Holway caused him to pause in order to catch Mr. Rodewald's answer.

"Pray," asked the lady—and her question, heard in that place, seemed most curious and irrelevant—"pray do you ever read your Bible?"

"Of course I do!" retorted Mr. Rodewald, indignant at the doubt implied.

From the sound of the voices, Mr. Smith knew quite well that Mr. Rodewald, feeling this was a case in which he might well dispense with the customary civilities of ordinary life, had remained sitting while his visitor stood.

In imagination Mr. Smith could see him, his coat flung wide, his waistcoat unfastened, his cravat pulled off, his chair well tilted back, and his fingers drumming on his desk, the while he looked tranquilly up in Mrs. Holway's face.

Mr. Smith knew quite well who she was, and the nature of the boon she craved. He had met her and her husband there too often not to have a pretty shrewd suspicion as to the position of their affairs.

But if there were nothing new in the fact of Mr. Holway being short of money, and Mr. Rodewald humming and hawing over the appeal, there was something quite unaccustomed in the sneering bitterness of the man's tone, and the defiance which rang in the woman's voice mingling curiously with its despair.

"I must hear the end of this," thought Mr. Smith. "What a joke it will be to twit Rodewald, when next one of his 'unco' guid' fits is on him, with the fact that there was once a certain lady who believed him to be little, if at all, better than a heathen!"

Whilst this was passing through his mind, the certain

lady remained a moment silent, and Mr. Rodewald repeated his former statement,

"Of course I do!" adding, "and what then, Mrs. Holway?"

"Nothing much," she answered. "I was only going to ask if you remember that verse where it says, 'What man is there of you whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?' But this is just what you have done to me. I asked you for bread—bread not for myself alone, but for my children—and you have given me a stone. It was quite optional with you to refuse the bread—you were merely following your nature in doing so; but it is equally optional for me to refuse the stone; and—and so—good-day."

"No, don't go yet!" cried Mr. Rodewald, eagerly. "You quite misjudge me."

"O, do I?" answered the lady; but Mr. Smith waited to hear no more. The rustling of feminine garments warned him she at least was anxious to be on the move, and he sped downstairs with a swiftness and silence that seemed surprising even to himself.

He had not been standing in the hall half a minute before the swish-swish of a stiff muslin dress told him Mrs. Holway was close at hand, and he stood aside to let her pass.

Her veil was down, and she looked neither to right or left. Like one blind, she sought for the door; and when Mr. Smith opened it for her, she acknowledged his courtesy, as she would that of a total stranger, with a bow.

Nothing more might have come of it—the whole ending of this poor little story must have been different—but that, just as she instinctively put out her hand to prevent her veil blowing aside as the door opened, she sobbed, and Mr. Smith caught the sound.

In one instant he was out in the street after her.

"Mrs. Holway," he said, softly, and, taking her hand, he drew it within his arm, "I could not help—that is," he added, correcting himself, "I did not try to help, hearing some part of what passed between you and Mr. Rodewald just now; and I fear you are in trouble."

"Awful trouble," she said, with a gasping little sob; "it is just ruin, Mr. Smith."

"Tell me all about it," he insisted, and led her, unresisting, into one of the quiet nooks abounding in the City, nooks where the stillness is so great that the lightest foot-fall makes an echo—nooks so lonely that with perfect security lovers might there whisper their vows and conspirators arrange their plans.

"Please confide in me, Mrs. Holway," said Mr. Smith, some devil at the moment possessing him, which urged a fight with Mr. Rodewald and every principal who ever might have backed him.

He had been through the fire himself, this man; he knew what red-hot ploughshares he had traversed; he knew the humiliations to which he had been subjected; and though Mrs. Holway was neither young nor beautiful, nay, rather because she was not one or the other, and, therefore, the more unlikely to enlist service in her behalf, his heart went out to her, and his soul longed to help her soul in this most grievous extremity.

This is no business novel. So far as possible I have avoided enlarging upon those details repulsive to many estimable persons.

Amongst the daisies and the buttercups there obtains a general haziness concerning acceptors and endorsers, mortgagees and mortgagors, lessors and lessees, which is indeed the only thing refreshing in modern Arcadia to persons accustomed to deal with those who have been nursed upon lions, and weaned on hypothecs.

But Mrs. Holway, though she possessed no knowledge of business, knew well enough what her present trouble was, and that her earthly means were thirty-three pounds short of the necessary for temporary deliverance.

"Perhaps he was right, Mr. Smith," she said, after the interchange of a few sentences, "perhaps it would be best for Fred to give up the struggle; but O, it does seem like advising one to drown and make no struggle! And then it is not our drowning alone. There are the children."

"We must try to avoid letting any one drown," answered Mr. Smith, with a smile which transformed his face.

For a time after he had told her he would "see Mr. Holway through" the most pressing trouble, Mr. Smith and Mrs. Holway paced that quiet court together.

As the sense of deliverance became less strange, as the

feeling that a friend in need had arrived most opportunely grew upon her, Mrs. Holway waxed communicative, and ere long Mr. Smith imagined he thoroughly understood the position of affairs.

"Come and have something to eat, Mrs. Holway," he said at last, "and I will tell you what to do. No, please put yourself into my hands," he added. "I know Rodewald perhaps a trifle better than you; and if we are to do any good, we must not merely meet this liability to-morrow, but be prepared to face all your husband's liabilities when they come to maturity."

"I am afraid Fred will be dreadfully angry with me," she answered. "He cannot endure putting himself under an obligation."

"I will talk to him," said Mr. Smith. "I will come out this evening to Leytonstone, but meantime you must follow my advice. I am quite sure you have not eaten anything since breakfast."

"I don't think I have eaten anything this week," was her reply. "O, Mr. Smith, it is wretched—it is miserable! I cannot rest by night, and I cannot eat in the day; I am wondering how long we shall have a roof to cover us—how long the children will see a meal spread."

"Mrs. Holway," interposed Mr. Smith, "kindly listen to me; I mean you to eat now, and to sleep to-night. I intend that Mr. Rodewald shall not purchase your freehold for an old song, and that Mr. Holway may enjoy his home in peace if we can anyhow compass deliverance for him; but you must help me to accomplish all this. I cannot trust an hysterical woman to do what is necessary."

Without the kindly pressure of his hand, without that grave, reassuring smile on his face, the words he spoke might have seemed almost harsh, so grave was his tone, so rapid his utterance.

Men such as he are not those, alas! to whom women instinctively turn in their bitterest extremity. Blustering, bouncing, swaggering, self-asserting men are, unhappily, the specimens ladies select as their ideal champions; and if Mrs. Holway had, before she left Leytonstone, been asked to name the last man on earth she might expect to come to her rescue, she would, had she remembered his existence, have named that limp, ugly, ungainly, ill-dressed—Smith.

And yet she was sufficiently feminine to allow that same Smith, when he assumed the position of protector, to conduct her to a very good place he knew of, where, quite remote from Mr. Rodewald's office, she could eat her dinner the while her companion told her exactly what he wished her to do, and counted out the money necessary for her to do it with.

"I must see Rodewald first myself," he said in conclusion, "and arrange the money question I personally have in hand, or it will be worse for me. In one hour, say, from now, you go to him, and state you have been able to borrow enough to meet what is due to-morrow. Don't let him pump you; don't go into particulars; don't be triumphant; be only a good, dear, sensible woman, and we shall deliver you from the lions yet. Good-bye for the present; go shopping; do anything you like for an hour, but don't have your pocket picked. Now—now—not a word, please."

And so, after taking his hat off in farewell, he put it on again doggedly, and went, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his eyes bent on the pavement, straight away to meet Mr. Rodewald.

He found that gentleman in the sweetest of tempers. Still in the elegant undress Mr. Smith had pictured, he was "going deeply into figures" when his visitor entered.

"My dear fellow, how do you do? Where do you come from," was his genial greeting. "One moment, please; take a seat. I shall be at your service immediately."

Listlessly and obediently Mr. Smith took a chair, and awaited Mr. Rodewald's leisure, which did not indeed necessitate any very great exercise of patience.

"Now," said Mr. Rodewald, after a very few minutes, looking cheerily up, "what is it—what do you want?"

"The old story, and the old want," answered Mr. Smith. "I can't pay the whole of the debt; indeed, I can't conveniently pay any part of it."

"That is bad," said Mr. Rodewald.

"Yes, it is," agreed Mr. Smith.

Mr. Rodewald looked out of the window and drummed on the table.

"Fact is," he remarked, after a pause, "my man is awfully short just now."

Then your man is no exception to a general rule," said Mr. Smith, with a melancholy composure.

"Can't you do anything? Now, just think. You were so sure when I saw you last."

"I was; but the best of us are out sometimes in our calculations."

"You had better look round again to-morrow; the matter has taken me by surprise."

"I cannot do that," answered Mr. Smith. "I must go out of town."

"You take things mighty coolly, it strikes me; anybody, to hear you speak, would imagine the liability was mine, and not yours."

Mr. Smith rose.

"At our time of life, Rodewald," he said, "we are surely too old to behave like children. It is of no use talking all this sort of nonsense to me. Either you will tell your man to renew that note or you won't. It is only waste of time beating about the bush. You know just as well this minute what you mean to do, as you will to-morrow, or the day after, or the day after that."

"Suppose, then, I say I feel I ought to advise my principal to close the transaction?"

"It would be awkward for me; but it must come to that some time."

"You see, Smith, though you ask favours, you do not ask them with the most ordinary courtesy."

"If you mean that I don't come to you cap in hand, you are right."

"And when I beg the smallest favour from you, it is refused instantly."

"Referring, I presume, to the spread at View Water?"

"If you had not been so certain of your own resources, you might have thought twice about negativing my request."

"Possibly I might; but it is not given to every one to be wise before hand."

"Now look here, Smith, you don't treat me well; but I really do take an interest in your welfare, and I don't bear malice. It is a fact that my man is short—"

"He has never been anything else, according to your report, since first I heard of him," interpolated Mr. Smith.

"And he is likely to be shorter; because I had a person

here this afternoon who has been falling back and back into his debt, and we are certain to have a lot of trouble before we can get anything out of him."

"But still," proceeded Mr. Rodewald, unheeding a commentary from Mr. Smith to the effect that it would give any one who tried to get anything out of *him* a lot of trouble, "I am quite willing to do the best I can for you if you only agree to meet me a little. Help me a bit with those snobs at Thamesford, and I will put the best face possible on this matter with my man."

"What do you mean by putting the best face possible?" asked Mr. Smith.

"Well, you know I can't do more than I can," was the answer. "You must do something."

"What must I do?"

"Well, unless I have at least five-and-twenty, beside the interest, it is no use my going to him."

"That is something quite new."

"Yes; you see, things don't stand still in the City."

Mr. Smith laid his hat down on the table.

"Rodewald," he said, "have you the power to settle this matter or have you not? If you have not, it is quite useless for me to waste my time talking to you."

"I am not the chief, but I have a certain amount of discretion. I think I may take it upon myself, indeed I will take it upon myself, to say that if you bring me five-and-twenty pounds and the interest before the twenty-fourth, the note shall be renewed."

"I am going out of town, as I told you before," answered Mr. Smith; "but if you tell me where I can get a stamp, we may, I think, arrange the matter in ten minutes."

"I have one that will cover the amount here, I believe," said Mr. Rodewald, surprised; "but what are you going to do about the twenty-five? Have you got money with you?"

"I will give you a cheque for it."

"And shall you have funds to meet the cheque?"

With an impatient gesture, Mr. Smith dismissed this question, and, dipping pen in ink, wrote the accustomed form on the stamped paper Mr. Rodewald handed to him.

"And what about View Water?" asked Mr. Rodewald,

as he looked at the note and the cheque, and jingled the interest paid in current coin of the realm.

"Was View Water included in the bond?" asked Mr. Smith.

"Yes; I understood so."

"Very well; give me your receipt, and I will go with you. Which is the day?"

"The thirty-first."

"Why, that will be next Thursday week."

"Quite right; and so you can remain with us until Monday?"

"No, that I must not do. Never again, Rodewald, I hope, shall I have to ask your principal for even half an hour's grace; and if I am to get out of that *poor* man's hands, it will be needful for me to work harder than ever."

"Gratitude is not your strong point," remarked Mr. Rodewald.

"Did you never hear that gratitude is a strong sense of 'favours to come'?"

"I am quite sure that is not true."

"And I am quite sure it is not an affair of sale and barter," retorted Mr. Smith, as, without the ceremony of hand-shaking or leave-taking, except the merest nod, he walked out of Mr. Rodewald's office for the second time that afternoon.

CHAPTER XXII.

MISS WICKENDEN'S DILEMMA.

By mutual consent, as it appeared, Mr. Rodewald and Mr. Smith had sunk all their differences, when, on the afternoon of the last day of August, they met, according to appointment, on the main line departure platform of the Waterloo Station.

As for Mr. Rodewald, he was in the cheeriest mood imaginable. No boy out for a holiday could have been in higher spirits. In the fun he poked at his companion there was not even a trace of latent malice; and Mr. Smith was forced to laugh in spite of himself at the sallies of a man pleased

as a child might have been pleased at the new toy with which Fortune had presented him.

"Now you are going to put your best foot foremost to-night, are not you, like a good fellow, Smith?" he said, as the train got up speed after leaving Surbiton, where the last of their fellow-passengers alighted.

"If I have a best foot, and that the chance is given me of putting it forward, depend upon it I will step out," answered his companion.

"O, you'll have plenty of chances, never fear," exclaimed Mr. Rodewald, gaily. "I have travelled up with some of the people who are invited; they are wonderful! Men of one idea, who lay down the law as if they were judges ruling a case. Occasionally Posinby comes round by Hampsfield instead of taking the train at Thamesford; and then nothing will serve him but that we shall travel together (I can do so, you know, by paying the difference), and in consequence I meet a lot of the great guns. And there is a fellow to be at View Water this evening, called Frankford, who will be nuts to you. He is a newcomer, I believe, has bought a large property between Reedbourne and Hampsfield, and as I heard one gentleman say about him, is 'simply too rich.'"

"That would be impossible for Reedbourne," remarked Mr. Smith.

"Now, the beauty of the matter is," proceeded Mr. Rodewald, unheeding his companion's comment, "that nobody seems really to know anything about him. His money, of course, floats him over the obstacles which trouble ordinary people; but it so happens I have heard how he made his fortune. Pray give me your attention, Smith."

"I cannot give you any more; you have it all," was the answer. "How did this candidate for the needle's eye amass his 'mound'?"

"Well, he has sent more rotten ships to sea than any other man in England. Come, that interests you. I thought you would like to see him."

"Of course, one always likes to see a great criminal," answered Mr. Smith; "though, upon the whole, I fancy criminals are awfully like other people. There have not been many jovial spirits among the terrestrially lost.

'Larry,' who played cards the 'night before he was stretched,' and the Scottish gentleman who

'Played a tune, and danced a jig,
Beneath the gallows-tree.'

must both have been possessed of buoyant temperaments; but, as a rule, I fancy villains are heavy. Rush, Mrs. Manning, and Müller, for instance, do not appear to have been lively individuals. On the other hand, it is true, poisoners seem to retain a good deal of vivacity and cheerfulness. Perhaps it depends on the nature of the crime. There is a suave respect for the conventionalities in sending off a vessel bound to sink, with sails set and colours flying, which one misses in the dagger-and-bludgeon business. Yes, depend upon it, Rodewald, your new friend is possessed of the most courteous manners, and that he is either a man of a most ready wit, or else cold and inscrutable as some ancient god."

"I know nothing about him personally," said Mr. Rodewald, planting one foot easily upon the opposite seat; "but I happened to meet a person who came from the same provincial town, and pricked up his ears at the sound of the name. 'Frankford! O, I can tell you a good story about him,' he said; 'a chap with regular features, cold gray eyes, white choker, complexion fresh as a girl's, slap-up wife, drives a fine carriage—that sort of thing. Well, on our Exchange, there was a funny fellow came in one day with the news that Frankford was dead.' (My friend had the story pat enough, I can tell you.)

"Have you heard,' said the new-comer, 'that Frankford died last night?'

"Well, of course, nobody had.

"O yes, that's right,' said the other, who was sufficiently poor to make and enjoy a jest. 'He died, and he went—well, you can all imagine where.

"Old Charon ferried him across without any to do, except that he made some awful joke about *his* craft being sound enough.

"At last they got to the other side, and there my gentleman was met by the prince of those parts.

"Hullo!" he said, "what's your name?"

"Frankford," was the reply.

"You don't mean *the* Frankford!" cries out H.S.M.;

“not Insurance Frankford—not the Frankford who sent out—”

“Here Frankford interrupted modestly.

““I have the honour to be the individual in question,”” he said, thinking the Prince of H—— would welcome him with effusion. But the Prince did no such thing. He simply took him in a friendly way by the shoulders and turned him round.

““Charon,”” he said, “take this gentleman back. We cannot have two D——s here. What you had better do,”” he added, addressing Frankford, “when you get to earth again, is buy sixpennyworth of brimstone and a box of matches, and *start for yourself!*””

“And so he has come to Reedbourne to start!” commented Mr. Smith, thoughtfully.

“The clergy have been down upon him in force, so you may draw your own conclusions,” said Mr. Rodewald. “He has given to *everything*—to schools, missions, local charities; contributed to the bells at Hampsfield, promised fifty pounds towards a new organ at Thamesford, put his name down as a subscriber to the fund in aid of enlarging the churchyard at Reedbourne.”

“Ay, as the brigands, after robbing some unfortunate traveller, offer a few halfpence to the Virgin.”

“I have heard you say that before, Smith,” reproved Mr. Rodewald, who did not entertain the idea that truths could not be repeated too often.

“Possibly, and some one else said it before me; it is not at all original,” replied Mr. Smith. “The notion that Heaven can be ‘squared’ is no novelty. And what a pleasant idea it is! When a man has robbed the fatherless and cheated the widow—when he has compassed the ruin of his familiar friend, and made a fortune out of the credulousness of some simple and confiding fool—it is nice to think he need only head a subscription-list or send a cheque to the nearest parson, in order to feel himself secure of good quarters in eternity.”

“It is all quite true,” said Mr. Rodewald; “but,” he added, with a little natural hesitation, “I suppose, Smith, you won’t draw it *quite* so strong to-night.”

Mr. Smith looked at him and smiled.

“Never you fear, Rodewald: I will roar like a sucking

dove; even if it fall to my lot to take the charming Wickenden in to dinner, I promise you not to outrage the proprieties of View Water."

"You are a good fellow," remarked Mr. Rodewald; "a very good fellow indeed, when you give your better nature fair play. It is important to me—I do not mind confessing so much to you—that I retain the footing I have gained at the Posinbys'. Whether I remain on terms of intimacy with them or not will, of course, make all the difference to me at Reedbourne. In selecting a permanent residence, a man should always be decided to a great extent by the consideration in which he is held by the neighbourhood. Do you not think I am right?"

"I daresay you are. I have not given the matter any consideration myself," said Mr. Smith; adding after a scarcely perceptible pause, "you intend, I suppose, then, to establish yourself permanently at Reedbourne?"

"Yes, I fancy so; Reedbourne, or its neighbourhood. If I can purchase The Snuggery, well and good. I may decide to buy it within the next twelve months, but about that I am not quite determined. That ass Cheverley may not wish to sell, and I may see something likely to suit me better. By the bye, talking of Cheverley, he is in London. I ran up against him to-day."

"O?" said Mr. Smith, interrogatively.

"Yes," continued Mr. Rodewald, "and a funny old fop he has come back. No more shabby frock-coats, but all in the height of the fashion. I scarcely recognised him, and I am sure he did not know me; for though he turned when I cried out, 'Hallo, Cheverley! who the deuce would have thought of seeing you?' he did not stop, but only bowed and said, 'How d'ye do, sir?' as he might to the greatest stranger. He was always an absent half-witted sort of creature, and I suppose he is the same still, notwithstanding that he has found a decent tailor and got his hair cut properly. What is the old jingle?—

'Send a goose to Dover,
And a goose will come over.'

But here we are at Reedbourne. Don't leave your bag behind you, Smith."

"I have engaged a boat to take us up to View Water," said Mr. Rodewald, as he and his companion proceeded

modestly afoot along the dusty road leading from Reedbourne Station to the village. "I thought it would be pleasanter than either taking the train to Hampfield or hiring a carriage."

"Heaven bless you for that thought!" answered Mr. Smith, gaily. "We should have been choked with dust travelling either by rail or road. The water is always pleasant; and besides," he added, reflectively, "we shall have the chance of drowning thrown in."

"I wish you would not say such things," expostulated Mr. Rodewald, nervously. "They strike me as very bad taste; they do indeed. Though so far as the drowning goes, you would be the one to sink, for I can swim."

"Yes, I think I remember your telling me so before," said Mr. Smith.

His companion looked at him, but Mr. Smith's face remained grave and inscrutable as ever. If he were mocking the redoubtable Rodewald, he did his spiriting sadly.

"What a lovely neighbourhood is this!" exclaimed Mr. Rodewald, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"Lovely," agreed Mr. Smith, contemplating the pensive beauty of Reedbourne.

"And wonderfully healthy. Not being here always, you can scarcely imagine how healthy a place it is."

"Worthy to compete, I suppose, with that Yankee town where they had to kill a man to start a new cemetery."

"You may jest, Smith," said Mr. Rodewald, severely; "but I am satisfied if you were to come and live here for a year, you would at the end of the twelvemonth be quite a different person."

"That would be a great inducement. I will turn the matter over in my mind. Do you remember that story of the man who had been shorn, meeting the lawyer who had helped to shear him?"

"How are you this morning?" says the fleecy sheep.

"Why not at all myself," answers the other.

"Then I congratulate you," was the artless reply; "for whoever else you are, it must be a change for the better."

"I don't think there is much point in the anecdote," commented Mr. Rodewald.

"I daresay the butt did not think there was either," retorted Mr. Smith; "but to return to our sheep. We shall be able this evening to imagine ourselves gallants of the time of the Stuarts, taking boat at Whitehall or York Gate for my Lady Betty's house up the river. If there is to be much of this sort of thing, Rodewald, you ought to let your hair grow and order a plumed hat. You would look well with a rapier at your side and a cloak depending from one shoulder. What with your fine tenor and a light guitar, you ought, in such a costume, to prove irresistible."

"Don't be absurd," entreated Mr. Rodewald.

But he did not seem annoyed by the pleasantry; on the contrary, its very suggestiveness possessed a charm. Far down in the recesses of his nature was a vanity of person quite as strong, though not so obtrusive, as his vanity of mind.

After all it was very pleasant, in the quiet evening light, gliding up the silvery Thames between green banks fringed with reeds and pollards, with no sound breaking the stillness save the dripping of the water from the oars, with no animate thing in sight save the white swans sailing majestically down the river to their home in some lonely ait.

Mr. Rodewald, more at home with the rudder than with St. George's mouth, took the tiller-ropes and steered, whilst Mr. Smith sat with folded arms looking idly over the expanse of glassy water, which reflected back the sky and the clouds, the bulrushes and the willows, the stately swans and the group of black poplars that marked the commencement of View Water.

"It is very lovely," remarked Mr. Smith, at length, dreamily.

"Is it not?" said Mr. Rodewald, eagerly, pleased with the appreciation.

When out with that gentleman, Mr. Smith always felt he must be in company with the proprietor of the Thames Valley; indeed, sometimes his mind misgave him that Mr. Rodewald fancied he had created the neighbourhood. From the wilderness of blue sky—and there is probably no place in Christendom where so much blue sky can be seen at a time as in some of the meads bordering Father Thames—to the weird and stunted thorn-trees, nothing

escaped his ken ; and he was never weary of singing the praises of that part of Surrey where his lot was cast, or of hearing those praises sung by others.

"Yes, it is very lovely," repeated Mr. Smith, in the tone of one who meant that it was so, in spite of Mr. Rodewald's belief to the same effect ; "but it is sad," he went on.

"Nonsense, man !" exclaimed Mr. Rodewald. "Sad, indeed ! nothing of the sort. Accustomed as you are to the rattle of the Strand and the din of Fleet Street, you find the quietude oppressive and call it sad."

"Of course you know best," said Mr. Smith, meekly.

"Of course I do. I notice that upon a certain order of mind the country always produces the same effect. I was talking to a Londoner the other day, a regular Cockney, I met coming over the ferry, who asked me some question, and we got into conversation. Naturally I made a remark about the beauty of the neighbourhood. All the answer he made was to look gloomily around. 'How peaceful it is !' I said ; 'only think of the quiet of the country !' 'Ah !' he broke out, 'what is that to the noise and bustle of Oxford Street ?' Now you have your sentiments put into plain language. 'For those who like it,' you would say, 'these verdant fields, this softly flowing river, the graceful willows, and the murmuring reeds may be all very well ; but, for my part, I prefer the view from Westminster Bridge, the lights of London, and the murmur of the human torrent ever rushing through its streets.'"

Mr. Smith listened and smiled.

"No doubt you are right, Rodewald ; no doubt you are always right in your deductions as well as your premises ; and yet I have always thought I had some love for scenery,"

"Quite a mistake, my dear fellow," said Mr. Rodewald, jubilantly. "You like nature theoretically, not practically. You think moonlight charming—on the stage ; you admire Nature—on canvas. But here we are at View Water."

"Thank Heaven !" exclaimed Mr. Smith, piously, as he sprang on to the grassy bank.

"Now this," continued Mr. Rodewald, after he had rejoined his companion, "is more in your way, I should fancy. View Water is conventional enough, in all conscience. Just the sort of thing to suit you, eh ?"

"It suits you, I imagine," retorted Mr. Smith. "If you must know my sentiment, View Water, fair as it is and beautifully as it is kept, is not my ideal of a home, any more than the gushing and carefully-preserved Wickenden is my ideal of a wife."

"Well," cried Mr. Rodewald, mortified, for he had taken View Water under his protection, and was quite at home in all its show points, "if you don't admire this place, I don't know what the deuce you would have!"

"Neither do I," answered Mr. Smith. "All I can say is, the place looks altogether too artificial to please me. I don't care for nature in full dress. I would rather see the wild dog-roses in the lanes about Chingford, than all those prim arches and long-legged standards. My soul loathes bedding-out; and I think Cheverley's place was a hundred times prettier before you dabbed all those scarlet geraniums and flaring yellow calceolarias about the front."

"That is your taste, I suppose," said Mr. Rodewald, in a white heat of passion.

"Yes, that is my taste," agreed Mr. Smith. "Behold, the Wickenden!"

"The remark came in very *à propos*," observed Mr. Rodewald, breaking into a forced laugh; "you might do worse, Smith."

"Possibly; but I fail to see the necessity."

"Why—who—who—ever would have thought of meeting you two here!" cried Miss Wickenden, running to meet them with childish impulsiveness, and extending a hand to each gentleman. "Now, tell me, where did you drop from? Came up by water? really, how delightful! O, how I should have enjoyed a row on that dear river! So much better than sitting in the drawing-room! I got so tired of the talk, I came out for a breath of fresh air—and a rose. Mr. Smith, can you reach to that bud you see there, high up? Thank you, so very, very much. How clever you are! Such a misfortune has happened—such a misfortune for me, I mean. Mrs. Frankford has not come; cannot come till after dinner."

"What has happened to her?" asked Mr. Rodewald, scenting at once a possible grievance.

"To her, nothing of any consequence. Some friend arrived—some one she could not leave without giving

offence. But you had better ask what has happened to me—poor me!" and Miss Wickenden pretended to sob.

"Pray tell us," said Mr. Rodewald, obediently.

"Relieve our anxiety," entreated Mr. Smith.

"Well, Mrs. Frankford's absence reduces our number to thirteen; so I cannot go in to dinner."

"But why?" asked Mr. Rodewald.

"Could not think of doing such a thing; somebody would be sure to die."

"Somebody is always sure to die," remarked Mr. Rodewald, practically.

"Let me be the sacrifice," entreated Mr. Smith. "Rather than that you should immolate yourself, I will return as I came, readily—nay, with pleasure. If you will only make my excuses to Mrs. Posinby, I can pursue the homeward path at once."

But, with a little shriek, Miss Wickenden negated this unselfish proposition.

Not for worlds—no, not for many worlds—could she entertain such an idea. Why, if she allowed him to leave, Ethel would never forgive her. Mr. Smith did not know how highly she was appreciated at View Water.

"I could tell you many things that little birds have said of you," added Miss Wickenden, "but I will not make you vain. And now I must bid you good-bye for the present. It would not do for us all to go in together, would it?"

And without waiting for a reply to her question, the Wickenden, in a light and sportive manner, fled away from them into the shrubberies, and in a moment was lost to sight.

Almost before she was out of hearing, Mr. Rodewald turned to his companion and said,

"Remember, Smith, you are not to fail me to-night. You are not to desert me under any pretext. If she is a fool, do not you be one."

"All right!" answered Mr. Smith, cheerfully; "I shall not forget I am under orders." But the next instant he turned his face away to the river, already darkling with the evening shadows which were creeping down over the Valley of the Thames, and muttered to his own heart, "It will be for the last time, though. That I am steadfastly purposed."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AFTER DINNER.

AFTER a great deal of hesitation and much coy reluctance, Miss Wickenden at length suffered herself to be persuaded that she might safely sit down to table without entailing dreadful consequences upon herself or any other person present.

"I am sure you are all very kind," she simpered—"far too kind, and I cannot refuse after so much pressing; but remember now, if harm comes of my compliance, you must not blame me. No one must please ever say, 'Ah, if you had not gone in to dinner that day!'"

"Make your mind quite easy on that score," said Dr. Merton. "It is not at all likely any one will return from the dead to reproach you with your amiability."

"How can you say such shocking things, doctor!" expostulated Miss Wickenden.

All this time Mr. Smith was keeping resolutely in the background, hoping to evade the task of taking the fair enslaver in to dinner.

"The doctor—good kind soul!—will see to her," he thought, and threw himself with ardour into a discussion concerning the width of the Thames opposite View Water, which had been started by his companion, a stout elderly lady, who looked like a professed cook "in a good family," and who stood by an open window fanning herself energetically.

"I think we have a better view of the river from our place," she said. "The Reach, being opposite, gives us, of course, a much greater expanse of water."

Though Mr. Smith had not the faintest idea where "our place" might be, he hazarded an opinion that when the floods were out there was perhaps too great an expanse of water.

"No—O no!" answered the lady. "The floods never come higher, even in the worst seasons, than the first terrace. Here, now, I should imagine the drive is covered. We are not at Thamesford, however, excepting in the *summer*. Indeed, it is quite by accident we have remained

so long this year. Sir Jacob was unable to leave town or we should have been in Scotland ere now.

In three minutes more she had told her companion the name of Sir Jacob's place in the North, the extent of his shooting, the distance from a railway station or a "shop of any kind;" and Mr. Smith found that he knew the district mentioned very well indeed, and that there was extremely good fishing to be had in the river which ran through Sir Jacob's estate.

"Lanham was the name of the gentleman who owned the property when I knew anything of it," he added.

"Yes, you are quite right," said Sir Jacob's wife, nodding her fat head approvingly. "Lanham-Lanham—Sir Jacob purchased the place from his trustees, or mortgagees, or some people of that sort. Poor Lanham-Lanham!—he ran through everything he had. Much the same kind of person as our friend Mr. Posinby—*wildly* extravagant, senselessly lavish. Poor dears! it really is very sad to be so constituted; but I suppose they can't help it. How the evenings draw in, do they not? We have been admiring the glimpse of the river you get between those weeping willows, Mr. Posinby. Dinner! Really, I did not hear it announced!"

And off sailed Sir Jacob's wife, leaving Mr. Smith to the tender mercies of Miss Wickenden, who, tripping up to him, said, puckering her forehead and making a little *moue*,

"I must trouble you to take compassion on me. I cannot—cannot go in with that wicked Dr. Merton. He says such dreadful things!"

And the guileless lady took Mr. Smith's arm, and looked at him innocently with a touching confidence.

There was nothing for it but to submit, and Mr. Smith accepted the inevitable resignedly.

"It must have been predestined," he reflected, as they paced in solemn order across the hall.

If Mr. Rodewald believed it had been predestined that he should figure solitary in the procession, he looked wonderfully discontented with the arrangement. Not all the nods, and smiles, and reassuring glances Miss Wickenden cast at him over her lean left shoulder could elicit a corresponding expression from him. It was the

a scene which dazed and bewi

"How people can be so rud
Wickenden, in a tender whispe
woman, you perceive, has thro
wrong. It quite breaks my l
Mr. Rodewald left out in the
Really, Ethel might have had
stupid doctor might just as w
That is the worst of being an
make one selfish. Don't you t

Obviously there was but one
and Mr. Smith made it.

From the moment he found
recklessness seized him, and he
ngly that Miss Wickenden bri
her head at him, and said he w

"Faith! Smith is 'going in
following in their wake. "I w
laudanum, I should feel as muc
this affected stuck-up lot?"

It was evident Mr. Smith felt
indeed.

"If he had been dining ou
weaned," mentally proceeded
not take matters more easily.

Which was inconsistent on the
he certainly had not desired th

opportunity for him by referring some question to his experience, saying:

"You are more up in such matters than I."

As dinner proceeded, however, and the first bewilderment of finding himself one of what he considered such a goodly company began to pass away, Mr. Rodewald recovered his temper, and found that he could address some remarks to Sir Jacob's daughter, who chanced to sit beside him, without grievous embarrassment.

That young lady, however, had, unhappily, not much to say, and what few observations dropped from her lips bore reference to the season, and the Row, and the Court, and the picture of the year—all subjects *caviare* to Mr. Rodewald.

Nor, when the spinster on his right tried to obtain an appreciative auditor for her pet scheme of establishing dried-fish emporiums all round the Irish coast, did he find that subject much more congenial.

For about the first time in his life Mr. Rodewald had, perforce, to sit quiet while others talked. It was a wonderful experience for him, an experience which taught him that, even on this earth, there are "more worlds than one."

The consciousness that somehow he did not dove-tail properly into the dinner-party prevented his extracting any amusement from it. What he felt most strongly was that he hated everybody at the table, from Mr. Posinby to a little lawyer, who told small funny stories, and made people laugh.

There might not be much in his anecdotes, but he drew them out neatly, and with effect.

"We had such a curious case, to-day, brought to our office," he said. "A young fellow is going to marry his grandmother, and we have to draw out the settlements."

"But that is impossible," interrupted Sir Jacob's wife. "A man can't marry within the prohibited degrees. Don't you remember the story, Mr. Chaley—"

"My story is this," said Mr. Chaley, firmly: "our client's father married, for his second wife, a young lady possessed of a mother. The son by the first wife is going to marry that mother; and I confess I have been the whole afternoon losing myself amongst the involvement of relationship

"There is no end of it, you which could be read how many hundred, was it?"

"What an art this is," "making conversation out of a fellow, who has sent so many accounts, is as glib with his smile as lay at his door."

It was quite true. At that time who had been accounted too busy "down there" was admiringly looking at the flowers on the table, and at the productions of his own on the art of display.

"Mrs. Frankford," he was going to say, "has a wonderful eye for flowers; she can produce the most extraordinary things, may say, a handful of weeds—common as found in any country lane; but she has thoroughly loved wealth, and being rich, looked plaintively interested in the unexpected accomplishment in one who supposed unaware that such a talent existed."

"I leave all those details to you," proposed Sir Jacob, in a good creaking voice, as Smith's teeth on edge. "I think I shall carnation; if I do, that is about all."

"Where is it?"

"Yes ; he is extremely good-looking."

"*She* is handsomer. Ever seen her ?"

"Never. Is she in his style ?"

"Marble statue business ? O dear, no !" said Miss Wickenden. "She is all 'colour and contrast.' 'A magnificent creature,' to quote Mr. Posinby. Not young. Must have been exquisitely beautiful, how long shall I say ago ?"

"In what play is it that one of the characters declares women and music should never be dated ? Do not let us try to date Mrs. Frankford. Your description has made me quite anxious to see her."

"Well, you will have that pleasure very soon. She is an accomplished musician also, I am told. I have not heard her play myself."

"What a fortunate man !"

"Ladies say, 'What a fortunate woman !' I believe she had not a penny of fortune."

"That is something to his credit."

"Yes, he grudges her nothing money can purchase. She might dress in cloth of gold if she had a fancy for such a costume."

"A scale formed of sovereigns would form an appropriate garment for some people."

"What a creature you are ! There now, they have drifted into politics ! How tiresome it is that gentlemen never can meet without plunging into questions quite out of the depth of us poor women ! By the way, what are you, Mr. Smith ? A good stanch Liberal, no doubt."

"I am afraid I am nothing, Miss Wickenden. It has been the misfortune of my life that I can always see both sides of the question. If a man is to be good and stanch, he ought to believe firmly, temporal salvation rests with the blues or the yellows—the reds or the greens."

"Do you know, I shall get quite afraid of talking to you ; you are such a quiz !"

"That is precisely the sin of which Mr. Rodewald often accuses me, and most unjustly."

"What side is he in politics ?"

"I have not an idea, but I should conjecture a strict Conservative of the opinions he for the time affects."

the clamour they make : and yet I
one mind."

At that moment there was hand
Miss Wickenden particularly affect
attention from Mr. Smith to the ap

"The lady of my soul likes good
to dissemble her love," considered
it must be pleasant to be able to
innocent a sin as gluttony.

Suddenly—quite suddenly, as it
but perhaps he had not been attend
up a noisy discussion.

The doctor was vehement—Sir J

"What do you think?" asked M
up the last scrap on her plate.

"About what?" inquired Mr. Sm

"The question at issue—unseaw

"My dear Miss Wickenden, upo
mind is a blank. It is really the o
white paper. Please instruct me."

But there was no necessity fo
instruct him. He had but to liste
bent of popular opinion at View W
vexed question.

"If there were still a gallows a
Dr. Merton, "I would hang ever
every sailor coming up the river cou

"Penal servitude for life would

discussion of a subject which did not, for him, possess the faintest interest.

"I fear I am not competent to express one," answered Mr. Frankford, and the serene calm of his face knew no alteration.

Across the table, Mr. Rodewald and Mr. Smith looked at each other for an instant.

"You have given your attention to the matter, I suppose?" suggested the Rector of Thamesford, addressing Mr. Rodewald; but Mr. Rodewald, in reply, shook his head.

"I fear," he said, "I am as little competent to express an opinion as Mr. Frankford."

To any one who knew him, there was a sneer underlying these words; but then, no one present, except Mr. Smith, did know him; and even the object of the satire remained unconscious that any irony was intended.

"I suppose I must plead guilty to understanding very few of the merits of the case, if any," interposed Mr. Smith; "but I confess I am unable to sympathise with the paroxysm of virtue which has on this subject lately been convulsing the British public."

"Do you then think, sir, that Englishmen ought to be sent to sea in coffins?" It was Sir Jacob who asked the question.

"I think it would be an extremely difficult matter to persuade Englishmen to embark in any vessel unless they had a mind to sail in her."

"But how are they, poor fellows, to know whether the particular vessel is seaworthy or not?"

"They know just as much about ships as the owners do, I suspect," was the reply; "and unless there are holes bored in her, I fancy an old vessel is just as safe as a new one."

"Certainly, that is the very strangest theory I ever heard advanced!" said Sir Jacob, addressing the table generally.

"Pray don't be shocking!" entreated Miss Wickenden, in a soft whisper.

"When I was a lad," continued Mr. Smith, "stopping with my uncle, who lived just outside a small seaport town on a dangerous coast, we used to see the colliers setting sail—little fleets of them. Every time they went out the fishermen used to shake their heads, and say of some

favoured craft, 'There's that rotten old Jane or Effie,' whatever the name might be, 'off again. I would just soon cross the Atlantic in a washing-tub. Why, you might pick her timbers with your nail !' And still, as my uncle used to remark, the 'tub' came safe back, and men were found quite willing to engage in her."

"May I ask if your uncle owned any of those remarkable vessels?" asked the Rector of Thamesford.

"No," answered Mr. Smith, "he was a clergyman, and, unlike some of the early apostles, he had not even shares in a fishing boat."

Which reply caused a laugh at the Rector's expense; for he was, though Mr. Smith did not know it, notoriously fond of sitting in a punt and angling for such fish as that part of the Thames boasted.

"Fact is," went on Mr. Smith, "no matter what a man's avocation may be, habit soon familiarises him with its dangers; and though I agree with Sir Jacob that men should not be sent to sea in coffins, I quite dissent from the opinion that sailors have anything to do with the present agitation."

"But, whoever may have to do with it, there can be no question but that sailors should be protected," said Dr. Merton.

"Do you think they want to be protected, doctor? I rather fancy that if you could make sea-going perfectly safe, you would not get many thanks from those who earn their living on the deep. Wherever a trade is dangerous, it is well paid; and sailors must be very different from other people if they prefer safety to high wages."

"But a man must have a value for his own life," suggested the Rector.

"Theoretically, he ought to have; practically, I imagine you will find he has not. Have miners taken kindly to safety lamps? Has it been found possible to induce the knife-grinders to adopt a single precaution against danger? And the reasons for all this are very obvious. In the first place, each man believes no harm can come to him; in the second, the profit is certain, the risk contingent."

"For my part," weakly put in Mrs. Posinby, "I wonder any one can be induced to go a long voyage. I would far rather die—I really would. I remember once, when papa

and I were returning from Calais, there was the most dreadful storm. I am sure every moment I thought the vessel must go to pieces."

"I am a capital sailor," said Sir Jacob's wife, briskly; "and so is Amelia. When we are in Scotland, we almost live on the water. We often say we ought to have been stewardesses."

And so the talk, ever, happily, at a dinner-table easily diverted from one topic to another, drifted away from sailors to pleasure-seekers; and the usual conversations ensued concerning places of resort—"charming, quiet, fashionable, hateful, and dreadful to remember."

But after the ladies had left the room, and while Mr. Posinby was drinking a great deal too much wine, and some of his guests following his example, Mr. Frankford, drawing his chair near to Mr. Rodewald, remarked,

"That gentleman opposite is a friend of yours, is he not?"

Mr. Rodewald said he was, implied he had known Smith for years and years, believed he might say he was more intimate with him than any other person living, and, at once adopting the *role* of showman, began to expatiate on his eccentricities, capabilities, and possibilities.

"He seems to have the courage of his opinions," observed Mr. Frankford.

Mr. Rodewald laughed.

"I doubt whether they are his opinions," he said. "Smith is always in opposition. The views he holds, or professes to hold, are invariably contrary to those of the persons in whose society he chances to find himself. He's a curious fellow!"

"As a rule, men who are always in opposition are men who have been unsuccessful."

Mr. Frankford made this remark less as a statement than as a query.

"Very likely you are right. Smith has not been successful, at any rate."

"He interests me," observed Mr. Frankford; "and I am sure I cannot tell why."

"Cannot you? I can," thought Mr. Rodewald; but he said aloud, "There is a great deal that is interesting about Smith, and—unintelligible."

Mr. Frankford stared at but seeing Mr. Rodewald saying that he wondered if

"I heard a carriage and the four gentlemen impelled, by one common

Mr. Posinby did not for the contrary, he boisterous when they signified their said to his neighbour: "We Sir Jacob, don't we? We

Sir Jacob, being one of not given to tippling, could of liquor without its prod effect, willingly accepted th who never had been known port decanter, or to be the likewise kept his seat.

Mr. Posinby rang, and o same more bottles of a parti every prospect of a convivi room.

Meanwhile, in the please many wax candles and fill flowers, where were assemb been invited for the evenin Posinby seated on a sofa be he had ever seen a man

wonderfully dark, if not black : soft velvety eyes, shaded by long thick lashes—a wonderful contrast to her light silky hair.

Smiling at some remark Mr. Frankford made, toying with her fan, turning with an expression of interest to Mrs. Posinby when she took part in the conversation, Mr. Rodewald confessed that here, at length, was the ideal woman, not of his love, but of his imaginings.

Here, in the flesh, was the reality of wealth, loveliness, breeding. Here was something which might that moment have walked out of the pages of a book of beauty and taken up its position—artistically posed—upon a sofa at View Water. Mrs. Posinby ? Pooh ! she was a dowdy, a fright, compared to this woman.

“I daresay he bought her—the brute !” thought Mr. Rodewald, who could never forgive any one for owning anything better than he owned himself. “Paid for her, I’ll be bound, as he would for a picture by an Old Master, or a rare bit of china. Hullo ! what’s up ? what is she staring at.” and Mr. Rodewald turned to see.

There, close beside him, stood Mr. Smith, looking like a man who had just brushed against a ghost.

As if fascinated, he, for a moment, kept his eyes fixed on the lady, then saying, “For God’s sake, Rodewald, let me pass !” he stumbled rather than walked into the conservatory, and, feeling his way as if blind, staggered on till he reached the outer door, against which he leaned faint and trembling.

“What’s the matter ?” asked Mr. Rodewald, hurrying after him. “Aren’t you well ?”

“No, I am not,” was the answer. “Go away and leave me, will you ? Hang it, Rodewald !” he added, irritably, “can’t you let me alone ?”

“But, my dear fellow—”

“Leave me—go back ! Keep every one away !”

But that was not quite so easy. Mrs. Frankford had said, “I think that gentleman is ill,” and instantly Mr. Frankford, Dr. Merton, and Miss Wickenden rushed to the rescue.

“What is the matter ?” asked the first-named gentleman ; while Miss Wickenden added,

“I noticed he ate nothing at dinner, and looked *wretched*, poor man. What *can* we do for him ?”

the door, in houses and the library night or day, Wh speaking as much to himse door locked or casement fa of London might walk in without let or hindrance— belief being there is nothing

By this time he had pu turned up the lamp, taken looking at the man who sat resting on the table, his head hidden by his right hand.

The doctor took the ot pulse doubtfully. Then, kn coat aside, and would have that Mr. Smith pushed him.

"It's not that," he said, a and hollow, and as if it came

Without speaking a word, purpose, and, rising, walke library-table, where he took

They remained thus for shifting his position, never looking at him steadfastly. ing of the clock on the audible. They were so far and from the servants' offic ~~great house no other~~

Dr. Merton nodded, and, walking to the window, which he had fastened, drew back the bolt, and passed out into the night.

"How is he now?" asked Mr. Rodewald, anxiously. He had come cautiously round the house, peeping and prying about till he found the room where his friend was seated.

"A shade better," answered the doctor, drawing the questioner out on to the lawn.

"What is the matter with him?" proceeded Mr. Rodewald.

"Can't say yet; have not been able to make any examination."

"What do you think it is?"

"How on earth can I tell? You ought to know better than I. Has he ever had an attack of this sort before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"And you have been acquainted with him—"

"A matter of eight years, I suppose."

"Humph! Been working hard lately?"

"He always works hard."

"Yes; but more so than usual?"

"I believe he has," answered Mr. Rodewald, with some twinges of remorse concerning those bills and that interest.

"Lives fast?" asked the doctor, carelessly.

"No; quite the contrary."

"Hat covers his family, don't it?"

"He has no one belonging to him I ever heard of."

"What's the trouble, then?" inquired Dr. Merton.

"Why the deuce can't he take things easy?"

"Old debts—I—I fancy," stammered Mr. Rodewald, who knew, none better, that those debts, however they originated, had hung round the man's neck, and weighed him down for years and years.

"Well, it is of no use speculating about the cause of this," remarked the doctor, after a pause. "What I have to do is to set him on his legs again. He is likely to be a queer, cranky sort of patient, though, I take it."

"Never a better fellow drew breath than Smith," said Mr. Rodewald, who considered this hint of crankiness a reflection, after a fashion, on himself.

"I don't doubt that in the least," answered Dr. Merton; "but he is odd, is not he?"

Mr. Rodewald said he
that charming lady ; and,
Merton retraced his steps
his patient. Entering by
fastenings, and drew down
straight over to the chair
hand on that gentleman's sh

"Well, how do you feel n

Mr. Smith looked up, but
At length, as if he were brin
long, long journey, he said s

"Better—better! I shall

"No, you won't," correcte
mean to get you well. What
one of these attacks comes c

"They never come on. I

"Well, when any attack
—dizziness—"

Mr. Smith shook his head
supporting hand.

A low cautious tapping at
turned—a voice, low as an A
quivering in it, as that inst
tone of gentle appeal,

"Am I to come in?"

With a gesture of dismay,
little more into shadow, and

Dr. Merton poured out a glass of brandy, and offered it neat to his patient.

"Take it," he said; "you will find it do you good."

Mr. Smith obeyed, swallowing the contents at one gulp.

"Ah," remarked the doctor, looking at him contemplatively. "Have another?"

"No; that's enough," answered Mr. Smith.

"Do you think you can walk now?" asked Dr. Merton.

"I daresay I can; I'll try. But I won't go back into that room," he added, with sudden energy.

"I do not want you to do anything of the kind," was the answer. "Keep yourself quiet for a few minutes longer, and then I will go home with you."

"I want to return to London."

"Must not attempt that to-night. Besides, you would be too late to catch any up-train now."

"Keep Rodewald away then, will you?" entreated Mr. Smith, feebly; and the doctor, answering "All right," again left the room. When he came back, as he did almost directly, he said,

"If you feel stronger, I think you will be better out in the air. Here, take my arm—that is right; we will go through the flower-garden, and so escape every one. I have been here so often, I could find my way about the place blindfold."

And, indeed, this seemed to be the case, for he piloted his companion down a corridor, and through a door leading into a shrubbery-walk, which, in its turn, conducted to a retired little corner, where there arose upon the night the perfume of all sweet blossoms.

Through the silence the plash of a fountain fell in rhythm almost as monotonous and quite as regular as the ticking of the timepiece in the library. Now and then a stag-beetle, in its hurried flight, brushed against their faces. There was a stillness about the time and place, a silence which could be felt.

They walked slowly down a moss-covered path, bordered on one hand by a yew hedge, tall, thick, and old. On the other side of that hedge lay the lawns, sloping to the river; but Mr. Smith was unaware of this fact, till, after passing through a green archway at the extreme end of the garden, he found himself close to the bench under the black pop-

lars, where he had sat with Dr. Merton the first evening he was in the grounds of View Water.

He felt surprise, and expressed it by some exclamation to his companion.

"It's but a slip of a place, you know, after all," answered the doctor. "These river frontages so near London always command enormous prices. When old Harridge bought it, to hear him talk, any one might have imagined he had secured the Garden of Eden. It's a nice spot, but I think a man may pay too high even for a good view of the Thames. Ah, that's right!" added the speaker, as a servant brought the gentlemen their hats and overcoats. "Tell that fellow to look 'sharp, will you?" he went on, addressing the prim-looking young footman, who was assisting Mr. Smith with a refractory sleeve.

"If you please, doctor," answered that personage, "Robert has gone to Hampsfield, and Miss Wickenden said perhaps I would do as well. I can bring the boat back to-night, sir."

"Make haste, then, and get something to cover your head. I suppose you are not going on the water just as you are?" added the doctor, looking with the utmost disfavour at the young lad's livery-coat, made of the finest cloth and the bright buttons shining in the moonlight. "Never a soul about the place when that soul's wanted," he went on disconsolately, as the footman ran off across the lawn to the house, "never!"

"Are you going home by water, then?" asked Mr. Smith, indifferently.

"I intend to do so, and afterwards I mean to take you across to The Snuggery. Yes, I thought you would turn up," he proceeded, referring to a figure which darted out from the yew hedge and came towards them, panting and gesticulating. "Just in time to bid my patient good-night, Miss Wickenden," he said. "I am glad to tell you Mr. Smith is somewhat better."

Miss Wickenden turned her eyes up to heaven, as though thankful for such intervention. She stood in the pale moonlight, a remarkable-looking figure, her hands clasped, the queen of night, with cold critical eye, seeming to ridicule her pretensions to youth and beauty, throwing grotesque shadows from the poplars over her figure, and

distorting her features by playing at hide and seek across her face through the foliage of the trees. A sad, weird, lonely, unreal sort of scene, as perhaps the three actors in it felt at the time. It certainly recurred to them afterwards as such—the water sobbing against the bank, the fitful moonlight, the dark poplars rustling in their ceaseless unrest, the river, with black patches lying here and there over its surface, flowing onward, swiftly, surely, mysteriously, to the distant bourne it had never yet beheld. The wind had risen a little also, and there was a sudden chilliness in the air.

"Go in—go in," said Dr. Merton, clapping poor Miss Wickenden's lean shoulder as she stood shivering on the damp grass in her low-necked dress and the thin shawl she had wrapped about her. "Here comes William, and we shall be off in a minute. Run away, like a good girl, or you will catch your death of cold ; and you can tell everybody Mr. Smith is better."

But Miss Wickenden would not go. She went on to the landing-stage, beside which the toy-boat View Water boasted lay shifting with the currents. There were tears in her eyes. She would like to have gone with them, and retained the hand she held for a time, perhaps for ever. She clasped it now in both of hers. Mr. Smith lacked strength, or energy, or spirit, or something, to withdraw it from what almost seemed her embrace.

"Good-night, *dear* Mr. Smith. I do *so* hope we shall hear better accounts of you in the morning."

"Good-night, Miss Wickenden, and thank you," he answered, softly.

So long as the boat remained in sight she stood on the landing-stage, watching it growing fainter and fainter in the distance, the chill wind fluttering her dress, the poplars murmuring and moaning overhead. Mr. Smith, seated in the bow, with the darksome water encircling him, a weak, uncertain moon glinting in and out eerily in the wide arch of heaven, the drops dripping from the sculls as William plied them with a dexterity which could scarcely have been looked for in a footman, looked neither backward nor forward, nor to right nor left. With head sunk on his bosom, he remained as still and silent as though he had been dead, while the toy-boat, gaily painted like a hum-

ming-top, as was common thereabouts, went merrily down with the stream, leaving no mark upon the river that it had passed by ; just as a man rarely leaves a footprint on the road of life to show where his weary steps have trod.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

No one, not even Miss Wickenden, had ever thought of calling Dr. Merton imaginative. Yet as the landing-stage and View Water and the black poplars and the smooth-shaven lawns receded into the distance, and the solitary boat glided down stream, with the river sobbing its way beside it, and the semi-darkness of the August night rendering all objects on shore sad, dim, and mysterious, he felt the whole scene impress him with a sense of sorrow and mystery no previous event in the whole of his experience had done.

The sense of contrast, perhaps, may have induced much of this feeling. The sudden change from lighted rooms heavy with the scent of flowers—from the hum of conversation, the sight of beautifully-dressed women, looking their very best—to the flowing river, the lonely banks, the rustling of the sedges, the brooding night, might well have impressed any one ; and when to this was added the enigma seated in the boat, the doctor felt for a short time actually oppressed with the darkness, the silence, and the inexplicability of the position.

“What the deuce was it ?” he thought, letting his mind for a moment wander out through the gloom, over a sea more vast, more wide than that to which the Thames was hurrying with such haste. “What on earth could knock a strong man over in such a fashion ?—more especially such a man—shrewd, sarcastic, indifferent, unimpressionable. There can’t be an effect without a cause—even Mrs. Posinby hasn’t an attack of hysterics unless she is more than usually jealous—and Posinby does not thirst for Miss Wickenden’s blood except when he has been ‘on the drink,’ as poor folks say, for an extra long period. If there had been singing or playing now, I could have understood

it. I have seen 'Ye Banks and Braes' bring tears into the eyes of a fellow six feet high, and stout and stiff as a prize-fighter; and the croon of 'Cushla ma Cree' send a man who has led a charge out of the room; but in this case there is nothing to account for the attack. He was well enough at dinner, he seemed quite well when he crossed the hall, I did not notice that he spoke to any one in the drawing-room; and then all in an instant he was staggering through the conservatory like one drunk! Yes, and the curious part of the business is he evidently knows all about it himself. I wonder if, spite of his denial, he has any disease? No, I am sure he has not; unless indeed it's mental. There's a queer look about his eyes I don't exactly understand. O, hang it! why do I go on lying this way to myself? The man's sound enough, only he has had some awful trouble. Now, the question is—what can that trouble be, and why on earth did it fasten its teeth in him on the threshold of Mrs. Posinby's drawing-room?"

Seated in the stern of the View Water toy-boat, Dr. Merton revolved these questions in his mind, while almost unconsciously he so managed the tiller-ropes as to take full advantage of every current in the river, every spot where a cut across stream could be made with advantage. He knew every surge and eddy, and weir and backwater and ait, from Moulsey to Staines. He had rowed and been rowed up and down that long stretch of water for life and death, for birth and burial, for accident and merry-making, in the early gray of a summer's morning, and when the shadows were stealing down in the late autumn, giving assurance that winter was coming and the floods would be out ere long, and boats have to be drawn up, and their use abandoned, while the waters covered the face of the earth, and the Valley of the Thames, so far as dry land was concerned, might be considered "without form and void."

The doctor could swim, and had been forced to do it for his life more than once. He was very severe at coroners' inquests and suchlike on people who, venturing on water, were unable to "strike out." He was also a good judge of horses, and drove, as even Mr. Posinby said, the best cattle in the neighbourhood. When he did not walk, however, he preferred, if practicable, to take boat for wherever he might be bound; and this unusual predilection in

medical man had given him an almost exhaustive knowledge of the Thames in all its moods and tenses, as it appeared from the time the weeping willows put out their earliest buds of faintest tenderest green, till the fallen leaves floated, brown and withered, on the stream, and the cygnets he had seen, gray and fluffy, carried on their parents' backs, as the old birds swam proudly with their burdens up the river, floated—their white plumage glistening in the evening sunshine—majestically to the aits where they had first heard the lap and wash of the water.

Yet, as has been said, not even when he was returning from the house of mourning had he ever felt so impressed with the mystery of human life and the sad solemnity of Nature as now.

Beyond the young fellow who had barely need to do more than touch the water alternately with his sculls, so swiftly did the current carry them along, he could see through the transparent gloom of the summer's night a dark figure sitting in the bows, with elbows planted on his knees, and bowed head resting on his open hands. Of his own choice Mr. Smith had made his way over the seats, and placed himself as far away from his companions as possible. He never seemed to move his attitude: not when the boat swung suddenly from its course, fretted by one of those cross-currents which often prove so dangerous in the reaches of the river to those ignorant of this special peril of the Upper Thames; not when a gust of wind blew sharp and cold across some lonely stretch or mead that came down to the water's brink; not when the throb of a steam-launch seemed to break the silence like the wild beating of some restless heart, and warned the doctor to put his helm hard a-starboard and hug the Middlesex shore, if they did not wish to be washed out of their boat with the swell of the venomous craft civilisation has invented for the confusion of those who love the dreamy ripple of the stream and the musical plash of oars, and delight in the murmuring swish-swish of the mimic waves as they break among the rushes, and work themselves into little paroxysms of fury against the trunk of a willow or a circlet of floating lilies. No, nothing seemed to move him: if the View Water toy-skiff had been carrying a corpse down to the churchyard at *Thamesford*, it could not have given less sign of life than the man

who sat in the bows lonely and desolate, holding dreary converse with his broken heart.

During the course of his busy practical existence Dr. Merton had not found much time or inclination for reading poetry ; yet as they swept on by grassy lawn and trees dipping their boughs into the river, beside sedges and bulrushes and shivering aspens, the rustling of which came distinctly through the silence more as a tremor to be felt than a sound to be heard, vague lines full of a mournful significance recurred to his memory, which each seemed to point to the quiet figure that to the doctor's fancy appeared darker than the darkness, more silent than the hush of everything around, save the ripple of the water, the sigh of the wind, and the sobbing remorse of those trembling trees, doomed, as the old legend has it, to perform a penance which ceases not by day or night, till time itself shall be no more.

Upon the whole, he was not sorry when the towers of Thamesford Church loomed in sight, and the young footman, holding his sculls for a moment suspended, and letting them drip above the water, mutely inquired in which county he should make fast the boat.

A mere nod and touch of the tiller-rope told him, and, plying both oars vigorously, he shot across the river towards Surrey. Another minute and the keel grated over the gravel ; then, quick as thought, he shipped his sculls, sprang over the gunwale, and, seizing the chain, wound it round the post which marked the spot where the punt that conveyed passengers across the ferry started for the opposite shore.

To Dr. Merton's surprise, Mr. Smith was out of the boat almost as soon as the footman.

Standing on the pebbly strand, tall, gaunt, erect, he said with the utmost composure—in fact, as calmly as though no tempest of feeling had swayed and no torrent of trouble swept over him—

“I really do not know how to express my thanks. You have laid me under an obligation I can never hope to repay. I will write to you from London. Good-night, good-night.”

“Not good-night just yet, my good friend,” answered Dr. Merton. “I mean to walk with you to The Snuggery.”

"I could not think of allowing you to do such a thing," declared Mr. Smith. "I am quite well now, I assure you—quite well."

"Yes, I daresay. The damp night air and that cheerful trip down the river could not fail to produce the most beneficial results; nevertheless, I am going with you to your friend's house."

"But really, doctor—"

"You had better wait here till I come back," said the doctor, cutting athwart Mr. Smith's remonstrance, and turning to the young fellow who had brought them down by no means badly; "I sha'n't be a great while away, and then you can put me across and leave the boat at Thamesford till morning. I don't want to go to View Water again to-night, and it would be hardly wise for you to try to pull back there by yourself; there is a strong stream running, and the wind is getting up. Yes, it will be safer for you to walk home. Now, Mr. Smith, I'm at your service."

During the evening a tent had been erected on a grassy promontory that stretched out into the river where the Reed entered the Thames.

The lock-keeper's cottage stood on this miniature headland, covered with roses and creepers, its garden full of those old-fashioned flowers which shed their rich odours so abundantly both day and night. Just outside the garden hedge, on the close-shaven sward sloping so gently to the water, a party of happy young fellows, whose boat was moored below, had pitched their tent; and as Mr. Smith and the doctor paused involuntarily for a moment, there came wafted across the little estuary formed by the meeting of the two rivers, not merely the mingled perfume of mignonette, jasmine, and sweetbriar, but the sound of merry voices, of hearty laughter, together with snatches of song, and an occasional attempt at harmony, when three or four of the travellers essayed to join in the music of a catching chorus.

It needed but this, the contrast was now complete; and as the doctor glanced at the set expression on his companion's face, an expression rendered more stern and mournful by reason of the shades of night through which it was seen, he understood—dimly it might be, but still with real sympathy—some of the feelings which were stirring

the deepest fountains in the nature of this man, whose past, present, and future were to him as the pages of a still unopened book.

"They are making the best of their time over there," remarked Dr. Merton, as a shout of laughter echoed through the quiet night.

"And they are right," answered Mr. Smith, moving hurriedly on. "If they don't have their innings out of life now, they won't stand much chance of getting them hereafter.

*'For ye cannot expect in December
To gather the blossoms of May.'*

I often think there is as much sound philosophy wrapped up in one old ballad as in all the proverbs of Solomon."

"Humph! There is a good deal of sense in Solomon, too," remarked the doctor.

Mr. Smith laughed—that mirthless laugh of his, which seemed to proceed entirely from the intellect, and had nothing whatever to do with his heart.

"I intended no disrespect to your friend the Wise King," he answered, in quite a calm and even voice, though he was walking at such a pace as to tax all his companion's efforts to keep up with him.

"Take it more quietly," suggested the doctor; "there is no need for such great haste; we have the night before us."

"I beg your pardon, I am sure;" and Mr. Smith slackened speed, and accommodated his strides to the more plodding steps of his companion. He had not, however, gone a dozen yards before he suddenly staggered, and would have fallen if Dr. Merton had not clutched him by the arm. He was in that state in which a man can run, but not stand still, move on to some object ahead, but loses himself if he stop for a moment to glance at anything under his feet.

"Hilloa!" exclaimed the doctor; and he slipped his hands inside Mr. Smith's arm. So they walked on together, now slowly enough, across the flowing meads, where in the early spring the fair Eveline had waited, in her pretty bonnet, trimmed with pink ribbons, for the tardy coming of her swain.

"Do you know why I insisted on walking home with you to-night?" asked Dr. Merton, after a long silence.

"Perhaps because you thought me more ill than I really am."

"Well, no; it was not exactly that. I did think you too ill to go home alone; but, in addition, I felt sure, if you were left to your own devices, you would lie down in some quiet place, and stay there till morning."

"You were wrong there," answered Mr. Smith; "what I meant to do was to push on as fast as possible to Reedbourne Station, and take the first train back to London; and that is what I intend to do still."

"I would not try the experiment if I were you. In the first place, no train ever stops at Reedbourne, either by signal or otherwise, till a quarter past three in the morning; and in the second, you might, if you attempt to go on till you have had some rest, run a very good chance of being taken to the nearest hospital on your arrival in town."

"You are mistaken on that last point," said Mr. Smith.

"I don't think I am," retorted Dr. Merton; "but, at all events, it is surely not worth running the risk."

For a second Mr. Smith did not answer; then he replied,

"Thank you. I believe you are right;" and walked on with a semblance of strength and firmness which made the doctor marvel.

He could not understand this man; the more he saw of him the more perplexed he became. He desired to avoid talking to him plainly about the sudden attack at View Water; but he could not refrain from putting little indirect questions, and searching in a quiet way for some clue, however slight, which might guide him to a rational diagnosis of the case.

Mr. Smith for some time humoured his bent, taking no notice apparently of the point where all the questions were tending, answering simply yes or no where practicable, or, if more lengthy replies proved necessary, using as few words as possible; but when they reached the stile over which he had helped Miss Wickenden nine weeks—or was it nine years?—previously, he came to a sudden pause, and said,

"In fact, to settle your mind about me, I have not one of the diseases you imagine."

"How do you know?" asked Dr. Merton, brusquely.

"I could let you into that secret also, only I won't," answered Mr. Smith. "Do you remember what Charles

Lever, speaking in the person of Mr. Kenny James Dodd, says about patients, namely, that 'nobody tells the truth to his physician *till he can't help it?*'. As a medical man himself, he may be supposed to have had some knowledge on the subject."

"Will you inform me how you apply that remark in the present case?" Dr. Merton must have felt nettled, for his tone was anything rather than agreeable.

"Yes; kind as you have been to me, I cannot tell you the truth about myself; and it is no use for you to endeavour to discover it by indirect means; but, at the same time, please understand I am not going to serve you the mean trick of practising any deception upon you. I could have thrown you on a false scent any time during the last five minutes, but—"

"In Heaven's name!" cried Dr. Merton, "why should you even think of doing such a thing? All I want is to cure you if I can."

"Ah, but you can't," answered Mr. Smith.

"Why, what is the matter with you?"

"Not much, perhaps, but it serves; for the rest, I am a man who has lived hard, worked hard, and—"

"Drank hard?" supplied Dr. Merton, in the manner of an interrogation.

"No, I have never flown to the bottle to drown care; if I had I should not be standing here now. But I have been through heavy seas, and my bodily bark has got a bit shattered during the voyage. I do very well, so long as I stop quietly at home, working like a forty-horse engine; but the social business knocks me over. The tone of a voice, the scent of a flower, the look on a woman's face, a jewel sparkling on her neck, the flirt of a fan, the rustle of a dress, the perfume on a handkerchief—ay, even the very pattern of the lace that trims it, suffices to raise the ghost of a long-ago past, and to bring back the demon I thought I had laid or exorcised, with seven or seventy or seven hundred other devils worse than himself for company."

"Come along," said Dr. Merton, more alarmed at the vehement earnestness with which these words were uttered than he would have cared to acknowledge. "Talking upon such subjects at this time of night, with a cold wet air blowing across from the river, is not the best way to

banish the fiends you speak of. Can you get over the stile? Mind that bottom step, it forms a nasty sort of trap. We shall soon be at the cottage now, where I mean to take the liberty of prescribing a tumbler of hot brandy-and-water for both of us."

Mr. Smith did not answer. He had, after that involuntary cry of despair, gone back into himself, and, with head bent forward and arms hanging loosely by his side, suffered Dr. Merton almost to lead him along the Queen's highway, till they reached The Snuggery gate; then making another effort, he pulled himself together once more, and answered Miss Lydney's anxious inquiries as to where Mr. Rodewald was, and what had happened to detain him, and why Dr. Merton, who was solemnly introduced to her, had come back with Mr. Smith, in something of his old manner.

"He is not at all well, Miss Lydney," explained the doctor at last, "and I have brought him back for you, please, to nurse a little, and set on his legs again."

"Not well!" repeated the lady. "O, Mr. Smith, now I come to see you in the light, you do look bad. What is the matter—what can I get for you?"

"Dr. Merton prescribes some brandy-and-water, hot, strong, and sweet; hot and strong, at any rate—I don't know about sweet. We came back by boat, and it was chilly on the river."

"That hateful river!" exclaimed Miss Lydney, as she left the room.

Mr. Smith glanced at the doctor and smiled.

"What does she mean?" asked the latter, in amazement.

"What does any woman, what does every woman mean?" replied Mr. Smith, enigmatically; then he flung himself into a chair, saying with a shiver, "How I love winter, because then there is always a fire!"

"Are you cold?"

"I don't know—yes, I think so;" and then he relapsed into moody silence.

"There," said Dr. Merton, when, after a tray had made its appearance, he placed a tumbler before his patient, "drink that up; it will do you good."

Mr. Smith lifted his eyes and looked at the speaker.

"Swallow your own prescription," he answered, "and

leave me to take mine. I am going to let you into a little secret. Rodewald believes me to be a confirmed drunkard. Now see."

And from the left-hand breast-pocket of his evening-coat he produced a small phial.

"What on earth is it? Laudanum? Never!" exclaimed Dr. Merton, as Mr. Smith turned the label towards him.

"Here, will you have this wineglass?"

With a mere gesture Mr. Smith declined the offer. Bending his fingers, he formed the palm of his left hand into a sort of cup, and began dropping the opium recklessly, as it might have seemed to some.

"Hold—halt! what are you doing?" cried the doctor.

But Mr. Smith held evenly on till he had completed a certain number; then, lapping up the dose as if it was something nice, he remarked in an unmoved voice,

"Now, I think I'll go to bed."

"One moment," entreated Dr. Merton; "how long have you been doing this?"

"A long time—"

"Ever since that trouble you indicated?"

"Off and on. I could not sleep. I thought I should go mad—and—"

"Well, you had better go to bed, now. I will come up to you in a few minutes."

Left alone, Dr. Merton paced the room for a short time in impatient reflection; then, opening the door, he searched the lower part of the house till he found Miss Lydney.

"May I go upstairs?" he asked. "I want to see my patient."

She took him to the door of the pleasant room Mr. Rodewald had christened the guest-chamber. A room small, but pretty, hung with pink-and-white drapery. And there stretched full length on the narrow bed, with his hands under his head, lay Mr. Smith, looking as though he had never staggered through the conservatory at View Water, never sat a dark solitary figure in the bow of the toy-boat, never given voice to his shrill despair at the stile across the meadows. An orthodox patient waiting for the attendance of his orthodox medical man.

"Comfortable?" asked the doctor.

"Quite, thank you."

"Feel easier?"

"Yes, ever so much."

"I want you to do something to make me feel so."

"What is it?"

"Let me take that bottle of stuff away in my pocket."

"Do you think I should empty it?"

"I would rather you had not the chance."

"You need not fear me; but, however, take it."

"Do you sleep with your door locked?"

"Wish I might, but Rodewald won't give me the chance."

"Good-night, then, and God bless you!"

"I don't think, even in our darkest time, He ever forgets to do that."

There was something in his tone which made Dr. Merton clasp this poor waif's hand more fervently, and then he groped his way to the foot of the stairs, where he was encountered by Miss Lydney.

"Well?" she asked.

"He is ill—very ill indeed," said the doctor. "I shall be over as soon as I possibly can to-morrow morning, first thing after breakfast. Let him sleep until then, and do, pray, keep the house quiet."

Then, as he plunged out into the darkness of the Thames Valley—a darkness which a waning moon fails to greatly illumine—he added, speaking to himself under the shadow of the gloomy pines:

"You have, spite your affectation of frankness, been trying to throw me off the scent, my friend; yet I fancy it must lie hot and strong among the company assembled this evening, after dinner, at View Water."

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. RODEWALD IS AMAZED.

NEXT morning early, as was his wont, Mr. Rodewald came downstairs and wandered around his garden. Upon the whole, he felt satisfied with the results of the previous evening. People had been very civil to him indeed. He

had been asked to sing, and, with the help of Mrs. Frankford, who accompanied him, got through a somewhat trying ordeal, so well that Sir Jacob said, "'pon his honour," it was astonishing; and Sir Jacob's lady—he could not catch the surname of the worthy knight—hoped, when they returned from Scotland, they might have the pleasure of seeing him at "our place."

One of the songs he selected, or rather one that was selected for him, chanced to be "The Message," which so overcame poor Miss Wickenden, she had to retire to the conservatory, in order to weep unobserved; and Mr. Frankford, with his pale cold face, and his sharply-cut features, and his incisive well-bred manner, had a great deal to say in praise of German music and Germans generally. Both he and Mr. Frankford were quite concerned about Mr. Smith's illness.

"I conceived a very high opinion of him," said that gentleman.

"And it is not often you form an opinion, favourable or the reverse, upon so slight an acquaintance," capped the lady, with a gracious and graceful inclination towards Mr. Rodewald, as though she would have included him in the compliment.

Indeed, the Frankfords were most gracious. Mr. Frankford said he should be over quite early the next morning to know how Mr. Rodewald's friend had rested. He gave Mr. Rodewald a seat back in his carriage as far as Hampsfield Park, and would have sent it on to The Snuggery with him, but that Mr. Cheverley's tenant declared he should prefer to walk the remainder of the distance.

And yet the success would have proved more complete had Mr. Smith been kind enough to defer his illness till some more opportune time! Further, what had caused this illness? Mr. Rodewald wanted to know that—he wanted to see and talk to him, and would have done so the previous night, only the doctor's orders were peremptory. His patient was not to be disturbed.

"I shall be over first thing after breakfast," were his last words to Miss Lydney. "Let him sleep until then."

For which reason, "until then," Mr. Rodewald felt he would have to curb his impatience.

"And I shall not be able to get into town till quite mid-day," he considered, hacking down with his spud, now a sprig of wild convolvulus, and again a feathery shoot of cats-tail, a trying sort of weed indigenous to those parts.

As he left the garden, after giving an admiring look—for, in his way, this man had a keen sense of beauty, a fine eye for effects of colour, and a really high appreciation of artistic contrasts—at the apple-trees laden with crimson, and green, and golden fruit, at pears mellowing in the sun, at plums yellow and purple, at damsons and bullaces tempting to the sight, at all the rich hues late summer wraps around her ere she merges into the russet glories of autumn, he saw, at the back-door of The Snuggery, Miss Lydney in controversy with a woman very well dressed.

"You had better return in the middle of the day," he heard his sister-in-law remark, when he drew close enough to catch a portion of the dialogue.

"What is it?" he asked, crossing the yard, clad all in "hoddon gray," his spud over his shoulder, his head erect, his step martial—a man whose appearance might well have inspired confidence in any one of the other sex.

"Why, a note for Mr. Smith, to be delivered into his own hands, and to take back an answer," said Miss Lydney, wrathfully, conscious, perhaps, that in a morning-dress, old though clean, and altogether lacking the many little adjuncts with which ladies arm themselves for social conquest, she cut but a poor figure beside this messenger from a vague somebody. "I tell her to come back in a few hours' time," she added, turning from Mr. Rodewald to the woman who had found her—alas! that I should have to particularise such details—skimming the cream for breakfast.

"Yes, you had better come back," agreed Mr. Rodewald, cheerfully. "Mr. Smith is not awake yet."

Certainly there was something reassuring in those clear eyes, that fresh complexion, that sturdy figure. Instinctively the waiting-woman—for she was my lady's lady—turned to Mr. Rodewald for help.

"If you please, sir," she said, "I don't think I can possibly come back again."

"Well, what will you do, then?" he asked. "Will you wait for a little time?"

"I do not see any use in her waiting," interrupted Miss Lydney, before the woman could answer. Miss Lydney was clearly "put out" about the matter; the messenger had mistaken her for a servant, and addressed her as such, an indignity which could not soon be forgotten. "In the first place Mr. Smith is not awake; and, if he were, she could not go up into his bedroom to see him. She had far better take the note back to whoever sent it."

Mr. Rodewald looked first at his sister, and then at the woman.

"What will you do?" he repeated, addressing the latter.

"I am sure I don't know, sir. If I could have seen the gentleman just for one minute!"

"But you can't," snapped Miss Lydney. "He is ill, and there is no telling what time he may be able to get up to-day, if at all—O, here's the doctor!" she broke off to say, catching a glimpse of that gentleman coming along a field-path; and, modestly conscious of the offending morning dress, she hurried off to make such alterations in her attire as she considered necessary for the credit of herself and the household generally.

The moment she turned her back, the woman, brightening up, as if struck by some new idea, inquired,

"If you please, sir, are you Mr. Rodewald?"

"Yes, my name is Rodewald," answered that gentleman, in a tone which implied the addendum, "and I'd like to see the person who has anything to say against it."

"Then perhaps, sir"—she hesitated, and then went on desperately—"you would give Mr. Smith the note. It will be just the same, sir, won't it?"

"Just the same, certainly," answered Mr. Rodewald, but without any over-readiness of manner, though he would cheerfully have given five pounds to possess himself of the missive.

"Then, sir, if you would be so very kind." And with trembling hands she produced a blue, common-looking envelope, and confided it to his care. "And if the gentleman would just say 'yes' or 'no,' he need not write anything."

"'Yes' or 'no,'" repeated Mr. Rodewald, taking the envelope. "Very well, I will see he has this the moment the doctor goes. Will you come inside?"

She did not immediately answer, but looked wistfully towards the gate, through which Mr. Rodewald had passed a few minutes before.

"You can remain in the garden, if you prefer doing so," he said, following her look, though not quite comprehending the cause of her irresolution.

"Thank you, sir, thank you," she answered; and, passing swiftly across the yard, disappeared behind the hedge, just as Dr. Merton turned the corner of the barn, and was hailed by Mr. Rodewald ere he could make his way to the front of the house.

"How do you think he is this morning?" asked Mr. Rodewald, when, about a quarter of an hour later, the doctor entered the room Mr. Cheverley had furnished, under the influence of his short-lived day-dream.

"He is not any better," answered Dr. Merton, irritably, "and he is not likely to be. Of all the impracticable men I ever met, he is about the worst. He says he must go to London to-day—that nothing and no one shall stop his doing so."

"I suppose he understands his own business best," said Mr. Rodewald, coolly. "When does he talk of starting?"

"As soon as he can get dressed. And I give you my word he is not fit to rise from his bed. I will make him up something, and send it over directly I return home; and if you can persuade him to remain quiet even for a few hours, pray do so."

"He knows he is always more than welcome here," said Mr. Rodewald.

And, after the doctor's departure, he remained for a minute or two, thoughtful and quiet, in the middle of the room. Then he went upstairs.

The apartment appropriated at The Snuggery to Mr. Smith's use, though small, was as pretty a little chamber as man need have desired to occupy. Ah! if his mind had been at ease, what peaceful slumbers, what fair dreams, might have come to him, lying there far away from London, in the very heart of the daisy and buttercup country—the plashing of the weirs for lullaby, soft airs and gentle breezes, bringing with them health of body, repose of soul!

Mr. Rodewald sat down beside the bed, and took his

friend's hand in his ; asked how he felt, how he had slept, whether he thought he could relish his breakfast, declared he ought not think of leaving Reedbourne that day—no, nor yet for many days ; said if he were determined to kill himself, they must have a fly to take him to the station, and that he, Mr. Rodewald, would at least see him safe to his chambers. It was not till he had risen to leave the room, in order to bring up a cup of tea, that he remarked carelessly,

“O, by the bye, I have a note for you ! The person who brought it is waiting for an answer.”

He placed the letter in Mr. Smith's hand, and, turning towards the window, opened two or three bars of the Venetian blind, so as to let in a little more light. Mr. Smith tore open the envelope and glanced at the few lines traced upon its enclosure ; then he turned his head and lay with his face buried in the pillow, as though he had fallen asleep.

Mr. Rodewald waited for a minute—walked to the door, and then walked back to the window. At last he approached the bed, and said, “Smith !” There came no answer.

He looked at the utter abandonment of his friend's attitude, his left arm lying at full length outside the coverlet, the latter held firmly in the fingers of his left hand ; the neck bent a little ; his head thrust almost into the pillow, as if with the object of shutting out all external objects.

“Smith !” repeated Mr. Rodewald, taking hold of him by the shoulder.

The other turned, and brought himself and his fortunes back from that far away country into which he seemed to have travelled the previous evening.

“What is it ?” he asked, absently. “Did you speak ?”

“I am sorry to disturb you ; but is there any answer to that note ? The messenger said ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would be a sufficient reply.”

“Yes—please,” answered Mr. Smith, wearily ; and Mr. Rodewald left the room, and went down the stairs, muttering,

“By Jove ! by Jove ! only to think of it ! I never was so much amazed in all my life !”

Now, solve this riddle, if you can, my reader. In the main, Mr. Rodewald was an honest man. Except in the way of usury, he would not have robbed his neighbour of a farthing. He might have been left alone with all the gold in the Bank of England uncounted, and not taken a sovereign; if he had picked up a pocket-book containing a hundred thousand pounds, he would have restored it to its owner and expected no reward; he would not have removed a landmark, or encroached upon common rights; he would not have defrauded a railway company, or if too much change chanced to be given him, keep it. And yet he would, and did, avail himself of any means to rob a man of his secrets, and learn the mystery of hidden troubles and sorrows, to preserve which from the knowledge of any one his friend would have parted with life.

He had opened the letter. At that moment a copy of it lay locked inside his desk.

"I *must* see you," so ran the words. "In the woods on Hampsfield Hill there is a tree called the 'Giant Oak;' perhaps you know it—anyhow, you can easily inquire its whereabouts. Meet me there to-night at nine o'clock. If you do not, I shall find out where your chambers are, for I must speak to you—once. Say 'yes' or 'no' to the bearer.

"A."

"So there is a woman, and *that* woman, in your life, after all," soliloquised Mr. Rodewald; and he murmured again, in the intensest astonishment, "By Jove, only to think of it!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"UNDER THE GIANT OAK."

HAMPSFIELD HILL appeared as though it rose out of the very centre of the town of Hampsfield, but was, in reality, over a mile distant from it.

The approach, after crossing the railway, lay first along a wide turnpike road, bordered by elms, and then through the windings of a narrow lane, bordered on one side by a

magnificent holly hedge, some ten feet in height, and on the other by a low open fence, over which a perpetually changing view was to be gained of the old-fashioned town lying below, of red-tiled roofs, of scattered houses, of a gray church-tower, of homesteads nestling amongst clumps of trees, of fair broad meadows, of streamlets winding in and out amongst alders and pollards.

"The Wood," which crowned the summit, and stretched in one direction far away along the heights leading to a barren moor, and at another, down a steep declivity, to a field-path, wandering away amongst green fields, till it lost itself in a great expanse of mead, where the richest variety of wild flowers to be found in one spot in England can be gathered in spring and summer, was, after a fashion, private property—private, inasmuch as that the foresters of the great noblemen who owned it cut down at intervals such trees as took their fancy, and lopped and topped and barked at the proper times and seasons without any interference from the outside world; but the public had so long claimed possession of the shady glades, the short velvety turf, the narrow ways winding hither and thither through the trees, that when the slightest attempt was made to fringe upon what the people regarded as their right, the whole country-side rose at once in arms, and declared, by means of the only effectual weapon at their command—brute force—they would not permit such encroachment.

A very different spirit prevailed at Hampsfield from that which obtained on the banks of the peaceful Reed. Here a man might block up an old path and enclose a common: but when, at Hampsfield the great proprietor tried to make what he called an entrance to the wood, build a lodge, and erect gates, the populace pulled down the last and razed the first to the ground.

They would have none of them—gates could be locked, and a lodge-keeper shoot the bolts. It was best to begin as they meant to end; and so the moss and the lichens and ivy and ferns grew green over the foundations of that which had been a pretty rustic little cottage, and brambles and wild convolvulus wound themselves between, and covered the ornamental railings—now broken and rusted and bent—my lord had ordered especially from Wolverhampton to modernise and civilise this wild portion of his domain.

Thus the public still retained the right to wander through the wood, and picnic up on the hill, and saunter along the grassy paths; lovers and brothers and sisters, and old men and old women and children, gathered the cranberries and blackberries and chestnuts and oak-apples, and no man said them nay. Those who were good pedestrians could push their way through Hampsfield Wood to the bare heath and the dark ridges beyond, or else dropping down the hill, pass through darksome avenues of pine-trees to the lower road, leading off to lonely villages, and remote towns lying higher, and further up the Thames.

But, for the most part, the sides of the steep ascent, clothed with thick underwood and young plantations, with gorse and bracken and a tangle of bramble of long grass and cover of all sorts for game, had been railed securely off, and notices were posted here and there that trespassers would be prosecuted. This very privacy rendered the hill-top more lonely and quiet. All around the wood claimed by the public, lay preserves, rarely trodden save by the game-keepers. From amongst the underwood pheasants rose with a startling whirr; across the glades hares and rabbits scurried, to be lost sight of instantly where the ferns grew thickest—a wild, pleasant, desolate spot, with which Mr. Rodewald was thoroughly acquainted, though he had never before chanced to pace its gloomy paths when the evening shadows, dark everywhere at that hour, were creeping black and close amongst the trees and nestling together under the interlacing branches.

It wanted full half an hour to nine o'clock; but let who else would be late, Mr. Rodewald meant to be punctual. He had hazarded a not very wide conjecture, based upon a study of the South-Western time-table, as to the time Mr. Smith would appear upon the scene; and he entertained a shrewd suspicion "A." might prefer to keep others waiting rather than to be kept waiting herself.

Precisely the same trait in his nature which caused him to open Mr. Smith's letter had driven him to pursue the adventure to Hampsfield Wood. He felt he must know all about it; that for Mr. Smith's past life to remain a sealed book was more than he could endure; his tide of opportunity was at its height, and he was aware if he did not adventure his bark upon it, such favourable waves might

never again enable him to learn all he had always desired to know concerning that "inexplicable fellow Smith."

His curiosity even assumed in his own eyes the semblance of a virtue. "I can serve him," he thought, "if I understand precisely how he is situated. Smith's great sin is reticence. He never confided fully even in *me*—in fact, he has never confided even in me, at all. Now, what folly! As if things could remain concealed for ever!" And so he wended his way to Hampsfield Wood, satisfied he was the wise man, and his dear friend Smith the simpleton. He had done well with his life; Smith had done badly; *ergo*—But why recapitulate the thoughts of this one sensible and righteous individual?

The same words, mental or verbal, have been set to the same tune from the time of the first Pharisee to our own present year of grace. In the sound there may be some slight variation, but there is none whatever in the sense.

Since the world began, there have been Rodewalds always amongst Jews and Gentiles; and till the world ends, there will ever be Smiths.

Close beside the giant oak—a most wonderful tree, possessed of such strong branches, supported by so hollow a trunk, that persons not quite indifferent to death hesitated to avail themselves of its shelter—there lay logs of timber and a stack of rough faggots piled high waiting removal. Moreover, on the border of the public portion of the wood, abutting upon the very ferns and undergrowth that lay on the other side of the rails, was a ruinous hut, where a forester had once resided. Mr. Rodewald knew the place well. What with the logs, the pile of firewood, and the tumble-down edifice giving upon the preserves, a worse spot, in the opinion of that gentleman, could not have been selected for a rendezvous.

"So like a place sure to be chosen by any one who had to do with Smith," he placidly considered; picking out his own ground with a decision of a person whose conclusions were foregone. "Yes, this will do very well indeed;" and he seated himself on a log of timber which lay between the ruined hut and the pile of firewood.

"What a comfort if one could have a quiet smoke! Still I must not risk tobacco."

It was a lonely desolate spot for a man to keep watch

voluntarily ; but Mr. Rodewald was not a person likely to permit either facts or fancies to interpose between himself and the execution of any project he had taken in hand ; whilst his imagination was vivid, his head was cool, and his heart cooler. His was not the nature, neither had his been the life, which causes an individual to start at the rustling of a leaf, and imagine danger in the snapping of a twig. He found the time long, merely because his temperament was one impatient of inaction and delay ; but he did not fear anything which might steal down the wood or glide mysteriously up the hill. The monk, who was supposed to haunt the further side, might have walked by, his cowl drawn over his head, his skeleton fingers counting his rosary, and Mr. Rodewald remained unalarmed. The man who had been hung in chains on Hampsfield Heath eighty years before could not have troubled Mr. Cheverley's tenant half so much, clanking along the glassy glades in such scanty clothing as his own bones afforded, as a troublesome tramp, bigger than himself, and resolute, as are many tramps in that favoured neighbourhood, to have "something from somebody."

The minutes wore by ; he heard three-quarters chime, first sharply and quickly, from a turret-clock in the neighbourhood, and then more slowly, more deeply, from the gray church-tower below. Immediately before the last chime died solemnly away into the gathering darkness, the down train came gliding along the metals into Hampsfield Station. He stood up to try if he could see its lights away down in the valley ; but the shrubs and trees on the hill-side, which had grown of late years dense and tall, impeded his view. After that a series of shrill whistles, and the London mail made its brief pause to take up letters and passengers from the little country town. Then there was silence for a while, broken only by the rustle of night birds and the scurry of rabbits ; a few minutes more, and the turret-clock, hurrying through the four quarters, struck nine with rapid distinctness. Before it had quite finished, Hampsfield church clock began its more solemn warning.

Mr. Rodewald counted the strokes—NINE. A great stillness. If Mr. Smith were coming he would soon be approaching. Not a sound ; one of the pauses of night had succeeded to the previous noise and movement ; not a

leaf seemed to stir ; not a bird or beast moved ; Nature, animate and inanimate, appeared to have fallen asleep.

All at once there was a step. Mr. Rodewald leant forward the better to hear. No ; it came from the Hampsfield Heath direction ; it could not be Smith, and yet who knew ? He stood up, and in the dim light made out the figure of a man trudging down the hill. It could not be Smith ; the step was that of a labourer, of one who wore heavy working boots, and dragged his feet as he plodded wearily homeward. The steps grew fainter ; but a light wind brought the sound of a gruff " good-night " to his ear as he still watched and listened.

" Here is Smith," he thought ; and he drew into a deeper shadow, and crouched closer between the wood-pile and the hut.

Yes, it was Mr. Smith at last. *He* did not look either to right or left ; *he* did not survey the ground ; evidently *he* had not his " wits about him," like Mr. Rodewald. He came up the hill at his usual long loose stride, and after one glance beneath the widely-spreading arms of the giant oak—one glance which told him no one stood there waiting—he dropped, like a person utterly fagged out, on the trunk of a tree lying in front of the wood-pile, and, taking off his hat, let the evening air blow cool about his head.

He sat without moving, without giving the slightest sign of restlessness or even life.

He might have been dead, for any gesture he made. To Mr. Rodewald, it seemed as though he did not stir a limb or lift an eyelash. What was he thinking about ? Through the mazes of what never-to-be-forgotten past was his memory toiling wearily ? In his grave he could not have found a quieter, lonelier place for recalling the hopes, errors, and sorrows of a life ; the daisies growing could not have forced their way upward from the sod above his head more silently than Nature now lay sleeping around his motionless figure. Mr. Rodewald grew fidgety, his limbs began to twitch, a maddening desire to rise and walk about pervaded his whole being.

The turret-clock chimed a quarter past nine—two quarters—three—and each time the solemn old church clock followed suit in a voice that seemed to hold a warning in its depth.

The last train from London, heralded by many shrieks, came rushing round the bend that lead to Reedbourne; far away in the east a faint moon gave indication that she had risen, and was about to commence her long journey westward; there came a greater coldness in the air; uneasily Mr. Rodewald began to understand the grass beneath his feet was long and damp, and that the dews were falling heavily. Still Mr. Smith made no sign. Anything almost would have been better than that long, dead, incomprehensible silence.

Hush! what was that—a bird in the preserves, a rabbit among the ferns? No! Instantaneously, and, as it seemed to Mr. Rodewald, without the faintest sound, a gate in the fence, which indeed he had taken for a portion of the fence itself, swung open, and a figure, clad in black from head to foot, swept by his ambush, so close that he could have touched the dress, so near that for an instant he thought he was discovered.

But she did not see him. There was still only a dim light anywhere, and the spot he had selected lay in deepest shadow; the hut, the wood-pile, the dark plantations, the spreading oak, all combined together to cover him with shrouding blackness.

The gate had swung behind her, and the fence now seemed intact as ever. She passed the wood-pile—she looked under the giant tree—she turned to peer under the branches stretching up the hill, and, as she did so, heard the man she came to meet, say,

“I am here.”

In a moment she faced round and saw him. He had risen from his seat and stood bareheaded in the quiet night. There was not a rustle—there was not a sound. Even the aspens, far down in the plantation, seemed to stand still to listen.

“I could not come sooner—I thought I should not be able to come at all,” she said; and her voice showed how she had hurried. Mr. Rodewald could hear her panting, laboured breathing, even where he stood.

The long dress she wore, released from her confining grasp, fell to the ground, and its *frou-frou* told the listener she was drawing closer to his—friend.

“Keep back,” said Mr. Smith. And yet the voice

sounded unlike his ; there was a ring in it, a depth of passion, a repression Mr. Rodewald had never heard in any voice before. "Do not come any nearer to me ; stay where you are."

She stopped ; there was an instant's pause ; then she asked,

"Is that all you have to say to me,—John ?"

"I have nothing to say to you," he answered. "I came here to listen. What have you to say to me ?"

"You hoped I was dead," she began.

"You are wrong. Hope and I parted company many a long year ago."

O, the agony of that utterance ! No man hearing such words so spoken could have doubted their truthfulness. They touched even Mr. Rodewald ; they gave him an insight into the man's mind he had never before possessed. A night without a star, a road without an end, an ocean without a shore, a life destitute of flower or fruit. Even the holly-berries that beautify the snow-covered hedges of winter seemed to wither away in an atmosphere whence hope had fled !

"You feared I was living, then, to put the matter differently ?" she said.

"No ; I feared rather as to how and when I might meet you, dead or dying," he replied. "I have never seen a crowd gather—I have never watched a new placard of any crime posted up—I have never read of a body being found in the river, but I saw, watched, heard with unutterable dread. That we should come face to face again, I felt ; I did not expect we should come face to face thus."

"Nor I."

As she spoke, the moon, which had been climbing higher and higher, looked sideways through the branches of the oak, and showed Mr. Rodewald that remembered face, with all the beauty wiped out of it—haggard, pallid, anxious, worn—such a face as he had often seen in the city streets at midnight, on women it were shame almost to name.

"What do you want with me ?" It was Mr. Smith who spoke. "You did not ask me to come here merely to know whether I hoped you were dead ?"

"No," she answered, very slowly. She seemed weighing

and considering each word she uttered. "I wanted to explore you to have pity."

"Pity on whom?"

"On me! Keep away from this neighbourhood; do not come back to it ever. If he knew—if he suspected—he would cast me adrift at once!"

"But I suppose you have always looked forward to some such termination?"

"Why should I? The very last misfortune I ever anticipated was meeting *you*!"

Something in her tone conveyed to him more than her actual words; for he started, and said:

"Then you *are* married?"

"Yes. Did you suppose we were not?"

He did not answer. Involuntarily he put up his arm, and caught hold of one of the gnarled and knotted branches of the oak-tree. Flickering backwards and forwards, the moon's pale beams fell first on his face, then on that of the woman, who stood rooted where he had bid her remain. It would have been hard to say which face looked the whiter in the weird, unreal light.

"What could it all mean?" Mr. Rodewald wondered. "In the name of Heaven, what had she ever been to Smith or Smith to her?"

It was Mr. Smith who broke the silence. "You remember," he said, "where I saw you last?"

"We need not speak of that now," she interrupted, hastily.

"We must speak of it!" he answered. "I saw you a painted Jezebel, amongst other painted Jezebels not more wicked than yourself. I saw you with the gas glaring down upon the face I once thought the fairest in all the world—a sinner in the sinfullest thoroughfare in London. I offered you then such an asylum as might enable you to lead a better life, and you recollect—or perhaps you do *not* recollect—the terms in which you rejected my offer and laughed it to scorn."

"Need we speak of that now?" she asked again.

"Yes; for I see you surrounded with luxury, received in respectable society—at all events, in society supposed to be respectable; a woman reputed to be married—a woman who has, at least, you tell me, gone through the marriage

ceremony ; and I must know how you have managed to climb from the gutter to such a point as this. Does *he* know anything of your antecedents ? "

"Nothing that is true."

"How did you win him ? "

"What does it matter ? "

"Not much, perhaps ; but I must understand—"

"Well, then,"—she hesitated for a moment, but immediately proceeded—"the next night after *that* night I went—I can't tell what possessed me, perhaps the sight of you, perhaps because I was sick of the life—"

"Put it on the last plea," he interposed, grimly.

"I went to one of those meetings where—"

"Never mind details," he said, as she paused, searching about for a word ; "go on."

"I was ill," she continued. "I had a frightful cough, as you know ; I could scarcely draw my breath. I was in such pain, I fancied if it were only possible to get into the country I might feel better. I was sorry I hadn't taken your offer. The address you gave me I lost. O I can't, can't go on ! " And she covered her face with her hands, the face he said once seemed to him the fairest in all the world, and sobbed aloud.

"Some sanguine person undertook the task of washing the Æthiop white, I suppose," suggested Mr. Smith. "What happened afterwards ? "

"I went to a widow, who felt sorry for me, and had me at her home. After a time she employed me to write her letters and read to her."

"Yes ; and then ? "

"She became engaged, and—"

"Wanted to get rid of you, I suppose ? "

"She wanted to get rid of me ; and so he sent me, with an excellent character, to another lady. When she died I entered the family where I met Mr. Frankford."

"And he knows nothing ? "

"Nothing ; and if you spare me he never need."

Mr. Smith did not answer. He took a turn up and down the turf underneath the oak-tree, his hand deep in his pockets, his face white as the dead.

As for Mr. Rodewald, never in all his life previously had such a frenzy of curiosity possessed him.

If, before this pair, so strangely met, parted, he failed to learn how they were connected—the exact nature of the relationship between them—he felt he would have to procure the information somehow, or die in the endeavour.

What had this miracle of loveliness, this worst of women, been in the past to his sad-faced friend: wife, mistress, sister, sweetheart—which?

"You were never revengeful, John," she began again, when he took up his position, and stood facing her in silence. What a sweet voice it was! what a low, plaintive, pathetic voice! more fitted for cooing caressing words and soft nothings than uttering such awful truths as he had wrung from her that night. "You were never revengeful, or cruel, or unjust. There was nothing little about you!"

"I was always a fool, you mean," he said.

Ah, so might Samson have spoken to Delilah when his strength was gone, when he could see her beauty no longer; when, in the blindness to which she had doomed him, he had such ample leisure to consider the treachery and the cruelty that caused his destruction.

"It could not serve you to betray me," she went on.

"Stop!" he interrupted. "Let us have an end of this. I am not going to betray you. Why should I? When it might have advantaged me to let others loose upon your track, I stood between you and the consequence of your mad crime."

"It wasn't I," she pleaded. "It was not, indeed; he tempted me."

"*He tempted you!*" repeated Mr. Smith, with such a world of scorn in his tone that she drew back a step frightened by its scathing irony. "He—that brainless, mindless, soulless, heartless creature you preferred to me!"

"Bravo, Smith!" thought Mr. Rodewald.

"Do not misunderstand me," continued that bitter accuser. "I do not blame you for not loving *me*. You were lovely, young, fascinating; and I—well, from my youth upward there was nothing about me to take a woman's fancy, to fix a woman's fickle choice. But you need not have deceived me," he added. "Up to the last, you know how you used to put your arms round my neck, and lay your lips to mine. Go!" he added, furiously; "go back to the luxury and the ease you have compassed for yourself,

and leave me for ever. I pray God that, living or dead, in this world or the next, I may never more behold your face!"

She did not move—she did not answer; she waited till the paroxysm was past, and he lifted his face from the arm clutching that oak bough nervously, against which he laid it.

"Why don't you go?" he asked.

"Because I have more to say," she replied. "Mr. Frankford has taken what he calls a fancy to you. He will seek you out; he will invite you to the Park."

"Make your mind quite easy on that score," he said. "I will never cross the threshold of any house where you are mistress."

"You don't know Mr. Frankford. He will persist in forcing his acquaintance upon you. He wants the help of a clever man—of a man who writes. You won't let yourself be drawn into lending the assistance of your pen, will you?"

"Why not?" retorted Mr. Smith. "You sold yourself; why should not I sell my pen?"

"She won't make much of him now," thought Mr. Rodewald, recognising the particular, and most impracticable, devil of the many that by turns took possession of his friend's mind.

"O, do not speak in that way!" she entreated; "you cannot know all it means to me!"

"I know what it means to you just as well as if we talked about the matter for twelve hours," he answered. "Upon the one side there is money, rich dress, fine carriages; upon the other—what shall we say?—perhaps we had better draw a veil over that half of the picture. You shudder! Well, well, it is natural; not because you hate the sin, but because you know its wages. Go home, and sleep in peace, if you can. I will not tell this man you profess to love the antecedents of the wife he regards, and justly, with such proud complacency."

"Love!" she repeated, with a bitterness Mr. Smith might have envied. "I hate him, fear him!"

"That is to say, you feel you have no hold over him. I suspected as much; for though you make up admirably, and are really still—"

"Don't mock me," she interrupted, nervously.

"I had no thought of mocking you," he answered. "What I meant to say was, you are not so young as you were fifteen years ago, and that which was practicable then is scarcely likely now. If he casts you adrift—"

"He would do worse," she cried; "he would prosecute me—he would hunt me to prison—to my death, if he could; he is as relentless as he is cold, as cruel as he is crafty!"

"I was only going to remark," proceeded Mr. Smith, as though this sentence had been unspoken, "that if he casts you adrift, it is unlikely you would ever get into such quarters again. It is not every day even a girl meets with a gentleman so impulsive and so unsuspecting as Mr. Frankford appears to be."

"And then there are my boys, John—for the sake of those, who have done no sin, if not for mine—"

He stopped her in mid-sentence. With something that was neither cry nor groan, but seemed wrung from the very extremity of his deep despair, he flung up his hand, and silenced her fluent tongue.

"I remember," he said—and his voice was hoarse and broken—"I remember a little child whose mother had no mercy on her. If you had been wise, Amy, you would have left out that appeal. Do you remember such a child? Have the floods of sin so blotted out recollection that you can talk to me of your boys, and expect me to forget that infant lying in the graveyard we both knew so well? 'Can a mother forget her sucking child?' asks the Bible. Yea, she may; yea, she may!" And his words trailed off slowly till they ended in a sob, that the wind, rustling among the oak-trees, seemed to catch up and bear away.

There was an ominous silence.

Mr. Smith broke it at length.

"Go," he said, "go, and tempt me no further. I will spare you as you never spared me. You left me a dishonoured and ruined man. But for you, what might not my life have been? and by your act what has it been? I gave you everything I had to give—the love of my heart, a home in which any woman reared as you were might have been happy; and you spurned all. You burdened me with a debt I shall probably never be able to pay off; you

covered me with disgrace ; you found it in your heart, not merely to desert me your husband—"

"Then they *were* married," decided Mr. Rodewald, with a gasp of relief.

"But your child, sleeping in her cradle. Go," he repeated, stretching out his right arm, and standing erect and stern in the moon's cold light, "go, ere I curse you ! For your sin, I, John Nugent, a man without home, or wife, or name, have held most women accursed since then."

She did not speak a word. There was that in the gaunt upright figure, in the stern, haggard face, in the deep, solemn words of his awful summing up of her crimes, which seemed to pierce the armour of her cruel selfishness, her sordid egotism, and touch some chord that had never vibrated before within her.

She ventured no further appeal—she spoke not a word of leave-taking. With the shadows coming and going across the grass, with the moon's beams flickering amongst the trees, she folded her cloak around her, and passed away in silence.

There was a click when the gate closed behind her ; a pheasant rose amongst the brushwood as she hurried down the private path ; the turret-clock struck the quarter, Hampsfield Church repeated the chime. The interview had not lasted half-an-hour, and it was over. Mr. Rodewald, peeping from his concealment, saw the space under the giant oak empty, and Mr. Smith walking as though shod in seventy-seven league boots, along the path leading to Hampsfield, without his hat.

"He will come back for it," thought Mr. Rodewald. "I must not move yet."

He guessed rightly.

Ere long Mr. Smith returned for his forgotten property. Carrying it in his hand, he went down the hill once more, and took the main road for London.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON THE CALAIS SANDS.

AFTER the lapse of months, which seem to me as so many years, I once more take up my pen and resume my narrative.

With both diffidence and difficulty, it must at once be said. How shall I interweave together and combine once more the materials and colours of my present and former life? how is it likely I shall be able so to bind the broken strands of a simple story, at best but poor, that the reader may find his former kindly interest in it still possible—may feel himself competent to forget the fact I remember too clearly, of a wide gulf yawning between Reuben Cheverley of the long-ago days, and quite another man, who, standing on a foreign shore, regards with idle musing eyes the silver streak of restless water which separates him from his native land?

I am dreaming amongst the sand-hills that lie to the west of the old town of Calais. In one respect I am not changed. In the narrow town lodgings which befitted my once modest means—beside the devious Thames, under the pensive skies of Surrey, wandering along the banks of slowly-rippling streams, bordered with wild flowers, fringed with alders, decked with lilies—I was at once a dreamer and a book-worm.

Since that period I have been out in the world. I have mixed somewhat with my fellow-men. I have occupied my mind with events rather than thoughts. I have studied the works of the great painters, and become learned in the styles of those composers most esteemed by persons who love music, truly, earnestly, in the deepest depths of their hearts; but I am a dreamer still.

I had thought the old habit was broken, the usage of best part of a lifetime laid aside; but here, with the sands stretching below me, and the waters of the Channel rippling slowly and softly in upon the beach, I find myself once more relapsing into useless retrospect and more useless speculation.

To this silent, lonely, forsaken spot of the great earth I have wandered out from Calais; to Calais I came from Paris. When I have heard what Smith wants with me here, I shall return to Paris.

It is Saturday, and high market is being held in the Place. No prettier sight, to my thinking, than a French market!—so bright, so gay, so different from any similar spectacle to be seen on our side of the Channel, that, as I strolled idly away from the heart of the town, and beyond the ramparts and the fortifications, I marvel English people do not take holiday for a few hours, and run over here to refresh their eyes with the different colour life presents from that they behold each morning of their existences in Great Britain, and accustom their ears to the pleasant gabble of a French crowd, which, to a stranger, sounds at first like a hundred children talking at their play.

Calais itself I am acquainted with fairly well, but I never before chanced to see it with the market-place full of Frenchwomen in their black dresses and their snowy-white caps, with every conceivable article displayed for sale on stands in the open air; with a Babel of sounds filling the air; with the old, dull, narrow streets quite animated with the number of persons passing along; with French horses shaking their bells, French cocks crowing defiance, French ducks quacking just like their English relatives; the stalls piled high with vegetables grown on French soil; gendarmes coming and going through the crowd, relieving guard on the ramparts, and brightening the foreground of a picture to which the dark attire of the women, and the ancient architecture of the town, present a contrast at once so graceful and artistic.

But at length (one tires even of pleasant sights), leaving the town behind—its fortifications, its harbour, its sluices, its soldiers—I began to wander out here, along an unpicturesque road, which, however, the bright and kindly greetings of the peasants made cheerful; through a scattered village, past a chapel, past a farmhouse, as unlike an English farmhouse as a French château is unlike a British dwelling of the same, or indeed of any, pretension; on till the road led across that which, for want of some better word, I could only call a common, not moorland, not heath either—a stretch of land wild and uncultivated,

terminated in one direction with a line of low unpromising looking hills, or, to speak more properly, hillocks; in another, away in the far distance, with a chain of what, in so flat a region, appeared almost mountains, with the sun touching here and there softly on their summits, and a vast expanse—miles and miles and miles of plain—stretching between.

The soft gray tints so noticeable in the works of French artists meet the eye everywhere—the very grass seems to have a hazy veil as of silvered gauze thrown over it; gray mingles with the purple tints of the mountains far away; and even the sunshine of the waning year has a softer, milder light than we are accustomed to see in the country of which, although my own, till after Squire Amriott's death, I knew so little.

As I turned aside from the dreary main-road—straight, treeless, hedgeless—and began to cross the tract of bare land intervening between the highway and the low line of broken hills which had excited my curiosity, I saw the ground was covered with a mossy lichen such as nowhere—save amongst the woods of Surrey, and there only at rare intervals—had ever met my eyes before. The effect produced by it is impossible to describe—that particular subdued colour characterising the whole landscape, not so much sad as subdued, could have, I began to imagine, no other origin. The vivid greens of England seemed nowhere around me; it was all as though the brightest tints were seen through a veil of transparent gray; the sky took its tone from the earth, and melted in some parts into softest azure, in others into pearly clouds. I had looked at all this before on canvas, but now it struck me with a strange sense of unfamiliarity and surprise.

Everything appeared beautiful, but unreal. I felt myself at the moment more thoroughly in a strange land than I had previously done, even in more distant countries, and amongst natives more strange to me than the French ever seemed.

The landscape, though lonely and unbeautiful, was not melancholy; it did not depress my spirits or weigh down my soul. The clear bracing air, the wind pure and fresh, the long sweep the eye could take across a country still, but not desolate; the calm silence of the distant moun-

tains, steeped as in translucent purple ; the pencilled rays of sunshine just giving what was wanted of relief to the cool grays, and the subdued greens and darker browns, of the ever-varying scene, which seemed to change and shift as the clouds flitted over the heavens, and tender blue or softest white, prevailed in the great expanse of sky, affected me as no other experience of travel had done, and left behind it a brooding memory that brings the whole thing before me again as I write, more visibly than I am able to recall snow-clad mountains, or seas steeped in the ultramarines of southern noon.

Marvelling what lay on the other side of the rising ground bounding the horizon towards the north, I slowly pursued my way ; now over stones, again treading lightly upon lichens and mosses ; now pressing underfoot a stubbly and starvelling kind of grass, and again noticing wild plants, such as one rarely or never sees growing save close beside the sea.

"Ah !" I thought, as my feet sank deep into sand and gravel, "the sea has been here some time. All those low hillocks have been covered, and formed, perhaps, a dangerous bar. The whole of this plain has lain under water long before any of us were living—were thought of !" And, with quite a new interest, from this fresh light thrown upon it, I stood and gazed upon the far-stretching plain.

A dreamer always, I marvelled how far and how deep the waters had lain upon the earth. I pictured to myself the base of the far-away mountains swept by the sea, their soft declivities sloping gently down till the waters kissed their feet.

It came to me in fancy, with the summer gladness shining on the dancing waves, with the green tints of the earth reflected in pellucid depths below ; and then the scene changed, and winter's blasts swept across a waste of angry billows ; storm-clouds settled on the hill-tops ; I could hear the moaning of tempest, behold the desolation of that scene, which no man had looked upon for centuries and centuries.

Then, my eyes taking cognisance of actual surroundings, I returned from dreamland, and addressed myself to considering how I could best return to Calais without retracing every step of the straight weary road which lay behind.

Up amongst the sand-hills I spied something resembling a sign-post. That would tell me of some way, more circuitous though it might be than that already traversed; and accordingly, keeping the one object which broke the monotony well in view, I started thither.

Climbing up sand-hills is not an easy matter, and long before my goal was reached I began to weary of the task. Deep, deep to the ankle every step—making scant progress because of the lack of any sufficient foothold, the sky growing grayer, the day older; but at last I gained my object. I was close under that which had looked like a finger-post, and found it a cross.

For a moment I remained still, looking up at it, considering how many a lone heart might have taken comfort just at that point, amid the storms and the trials of life, after long buffeting upon highways which are, to most, sterile and difficult; then, turning to the right, by the breadth of perhaps a hand, I stood spell-bound, for below me lay the sea.

Yes, the sea. A calm expanse of gray, lonely beyond description or belief; a wide stretch of sand perfectly smooth, perfectly level; in our sense of the word no shore—that is, no pebbly beach, no stony margin: sand up the low range of hills, on the side of one of which I stood, and beyond also, for were not they sand too?

It is a hard thing to tell the impression produced by such a scene as this, for often all man's language is but poor to convey ideas. To some a painter might appeal, and not in vain, for sympathy and comprehension, if he drew on canvas what I can but imperfectly describe in these pages. The want of ability to portray to you the effect caused by coming so suddenly, and, as it seemed to me, so strangely, upon that majestic waste of waters, makes me hesitate to attempt to express now what I have felt most deeply—the mystery thus typified of looking with eyes more startled upon a wider and more awful ocean, where the tides never flow back to earth, where the waves bear man's bark to an unseen and unknown shore, across whose vast expanse no traveller returns, from which no message may be carried to those left behind, from whence no voice can echo its cheerful greeting, wherein all, to us, is mystery and dread.

Some day, before this story is quite ended, I may tell you how, and when, and why this scene recurred, with such associations, to my memory. Just then, after the first shock of delighted surprise, my strongest feeling was one of wonder as to how I should best guide my steps back to Calais. Would it be wise for me to descend and adventure a return by the sands, or would it be more prudent to retrace my path as I had pursued it? or should I adopt a middle course, and walk up and down those sand-hills till I met with some one able and willing to direct me on my way.

Far below, I saw a man walking rapidly along. Before I could possibly reach the beach he would have passed out of earshot. Against the sky-line three black figures showed for a moment, and then disappeared down one of the sand-hills. They were ecclesiastics—even in the distance I was able to see this much; but almost as soon as I had decided they were proceeding from, and not coming towards, me, they were lost to view.

A wild lonely place that seemed to me at the moment. The cross still stood solitary on the hill-side. I bethought me, as I gazed, of a quiet grave-yard I passed on my way, lying back a little from the road. I spent half an hour wandering about it, looking at touching memorials, tawdry decorations, wonderful monuments, inscriptions sacred to those drowned at sea, killed on land, dead surrounded by their families; and it seemed to me as though a wailing wind arose from the gray, sullen waters, bearing strange sounds with it to where I stood.

I had not the faintest idea whether there was any path which might conduct over the sand-hills back to Calais; but the knowledge that those priests had taken the way before me, and that crosses were not often erected where human footsteps never passed, decided me to experiment on the subject.

Resolutely I was beginning the descent of the sand-hill, from which I had surveyed the sea, when a ringing shout broke the silence around.

I paused and listened, looked up and down about everywhere, then I turned to pursue my path.

The moment I did so an unmistakable English "Hi! hi! hi!" saluted my ear.

"Stop a bit!" rang out to me in the once familiar language, to which of late I had been a stranger. "I am coming as fast as I can."

Then I knew who it was, and waited. In another minute Mr. Smith and I were grasping each the other's hand. He had climbed to the height on which I stood, with long loose, rapid strides; but he was a little out of breath, and seemed no more inconvenienced by the difficulties of the sharp ascent, than he might have been after taking a gentle stroll along the highway.

A man who had lived hard, worked hard, thought hard, suffered hard; who made light both of physical and mental toil; who seemed to me, though I then knew nothing of his past history, of his weary wrestlings with misfortune, very heroic in the world's strife, a soldier rather than whom, in life's long march, in its bivouacs around its strange camps and fires, amid its dangers, fatigues, hardships, one need ask for a better comrade. Our acquaintance had not been long, but intimate, and from the first hour of our meeting, on the night of Allen's lecture, he exercised a wonderful fascination over my mind, which was by no means diminished on the occasion when he and Mr. Rodewald partook of tea at The Snuggery.

From that time I neither saw nor heard anything of Mr. Smith, till some opportune assistance he extended to Mr. Holway, wife of that fellow-clerk of mine in the old "Home and Foreign," I had been able to help just after the advent of Mr. Amiot's legacy, brought me into correspondence with him. Then, in Paris, chance or design—the latter on my part, I think, and the former on his—threw us together. We met each other often, and I may say I never bade him good-bye without a feeling of regret, without an increased desire to know more of a man who seemed to me a living walking mystery; who was totally unlike any person I had ever talked with before; who, both in speaking and thinking, followed no stereotyped rules; who was for ever leaving beaten tracks of language and established modes of thought, and striking out strange paths for himself through the thicket, across lonely wildernesses of speculation and up into mountain fastnesses of daring and desolate inquiry, where others were almost afraid to look.

It was solely at his request I had come to Calais. Why

wanted me there, what he wanted when he got me there, I could not conjecture. We were to have met at the hotel in the evening, and consequently there was not the slightest reason why I should have expected to encounter him in that lonely spot; yet no feeling of surprise mingled with the pleasure I experienced in seeing his sad whimsical face, reflecting his grave, kindly smile, and answering his indisputably true remark,

"So you *are* in this cheerful range of sand-hills, after all?"

"Yes," I said; "but how in the world did you find me?"

"Where should I find a child with a penny in its hand but in the nearest sweetstuff-shop, and where should I be so sure to meet with you, as in the loneliest, saddest, dreariest spot of country within reach?"

"I do not consider all this lonely, or sad, or dreary."

"Of course not; I never expected you would. I felt certain I should come upon you contemplating a stretch of barren moorland or a waste of sullen sea, with rapturous delight."

"When did you arrive?"

"Let me see—O, two hours ago. Then, hearing you were out, I looked for you round the town, and strolled down to the fortifications; good Lord! if the sight of them isn't enough to make a man go hang himself! There I received intelligence you had passed along, and I followed through the delightful scenery you think so enchanting. I went some distance beyond the point where you must have turned aside; but as I could gain no tidings of you, I hastened back, and thought I would try the shore. I had just managed nearly to break my neck by coming down the last part of the descent at a run, when I saw you standing solemnly surveying the landscape. And that is all I have to say."

"And all I have to say is, I am very glad to see you."

"Why? Did you think in these wilds you should not be able to find your way back to Calais?"

"I do not mean that," I said; "I am only glad to see you for yourself, as I always am."

"O, that's it, is it?" he exclaimed, carelessly. "Much obliged, I am sure. Let us go down on the sands."

"There is no danger, I suppose?" I suggested, for manifestly the tide was flowing.

"Pooh, none! and if there were, what would it matter?"

"I don't know how you value your own life—" I began, when he interrupted me.

"And I am quite sure that is a point on which I can enlighten you. However, you need be under no apprehension in adopting me as your guide about this charming neighbourhood. Bless you, I know it from Genesis Revelations, from Adam to the Apocalypse. I have walked the road behind us when life looked to me a trifle more dreary than the road, and I have paced the sands when I should have felt glad if the hungry waves lapping in on the shore had, on their return, taken me a longer journey than themselves. It is past now, like a fever or a battle; but I shall be always fond of Calais, remembering what horrible sufferings its gray, cool tints and calm repose soothed to rest. The touch of the plainest and oldest woman is sometimes more grateful than that of a skittish young maiden. Well, there are lovelier places on earth than Calais, but it has seen me through many a trouble I could not have borne, I think, in a smiling country—in a rich, beautiful, cultivated land!"

We went down to the beach together, and out to the very margin of the sea.

"It is nice here, is it not?" he said, after he had paused for a little, looking thoughtfully over the solemn expanse of sullen water. "What, are you shivering?" he asked; then he added, immediately, almost under his breath, "Well, I can understand that, too."

"Shall we walk on? The air grows chilly," I said, though in truth the coldness that seemed to creep over my spirits was less in the air than in the sorrowful look of that vast expanse of lonely sea.

"Yes, let us walk on," he answered; and we paced together for a short time in silence, whilst his eyes gazed wistfully over the gray waters. At length, with a gesture which had become familiar to me, he seemed to shake his mind out of its abstraction, and began,

"Now, I'll be bound you wonder what in the world induced me to ask you to come to Calais?"

"I have no doubt you had some very good reason for your request," I answered.

"A reason which seemed to me good," he replied; "and yet, do you know, I am afraid you will not be best pleased with me when you hear it."

"If it is anything about money," I suggested, hesitatingly, for he seemed reluctant himself to enter upon the subject; and even when one knows a man to be poor, it is awkward to hint, without a fear of giving offence, that he may be in want of help.

"No, it is nothing about money," he answered, with a short laugh. "You rich folks always think poor devils like myself know no other cause of anxiety save that produced by an empty purse."

"What is it, then?" I asked; "you may be quite frank with me, and feel sure if it lies in my power to help you I will do it."

"Thank you," he replied. "I believe what you say. I do not regard such utterances from you as mere words of course. See, I cannot talk to you while we are walking—you will think me a strange fellow, full of fads and fancies; but sit down: there is a good big hard stone close under a covered sand-hill, well sheltered from the wind, let us make for that."

It was, as he said, a good hard stone; but when we reached it he would not share my seat.

"You sit down," he said, "and I will stand;" which accordingly he did, leaning against the poor grass and unpromising tufts of foliage that failed to cover the sand cliff which formed one side of the nook.

"When does the next boat leave for Dover?" asked Mr. Smith, as he sifted a handful of sand with some apparent carefulness through his fingers.

"You know as well as I do," was my answer. "There is nothing till to-morrow morning."

"One A.M., or thereabouts?"

"I believe so."

"I wish you would cross in her."

"If you give me any good reason why I should, I will go with pleasure."

"I don't think you will," he said, dubiously; "but, however, we shall soon see. Here goes! You thought, when I asked you to meet me at Calais, I wanted you to do something for me; didn't you?"

"Most certainly. I should not have come otherwise."

"No; I knew you would not. Well, the fact is, you can do nothing for me. You did all that was possible, and far more than I expected, when you paid me the amount I advanced to Holway."

"I wish you would not mention that."

"I am not going to mention it at present. I only said anything about it now in connection with my statement of standing in no need of help. But *you* stand in need of it," he went on, speaking rapidly; "you can do something for yourself."

"What, in Heaven's name?" I asked, surprised out of an equanimity of manner, years of poverty and enforced submission had rendered natural.

"You can go to England, and stop there," he said.

"And why should I go to England and stop there?" I inquired, feeling doubtful, as I spoke, whether my companion had not taken leave of his senses.

"Because you will never repent taking the next boat back to Dover, rather than the next train back to Paris."

I looked at him in amazement, yet with a sudden sinking of my heart, which should have served as a warning signal for what was coming.

"Have you any cause for supposing I should repent returning to Paris?"

"Yes," he said, shortly.

"What is it?"

"Don't you know?" he replied.

It had come! In one second I understood what he meant. With a rush and a mighty shock, even while he spoke, it seemed to me the world had come into collision with the even tenor of my life, and when the confusion cleared a little I found myself on a lonely sea-shore, with the white-winged gulls making the scene more solitary still, trying to crawl, maimed and crushed and bleeding, out of the wreck and ruin of hopes and dreams and innocent fantasies, that lay strewn all around.

How long I remained there speechless I have not a notion—what time passed during which I saw nothing but *that gray waste of waters*, heard nothing save the sobbing *of the wind* and the low moaning of the waves, I can form *no idea*. If I had been taken up to the top of a steep

precipice and flung suddenly down, I could not have felt more stunned and helpless.

"You are not angry?" said my companion at last, more by way of a statement than a question.

"No, I am not angry," I half whispered, answering his remark almost against my will.

"It would not do," he went on, putting his hands deep in his pockets, and apparently addressing any object in the whole of the desolate landscape rather than myself. "It is a sort of thing never does do. So long as men and women are men and women, prudence will recognise the fact—so long as the world possesses a tongue, it is as well to give it no occasion to talk."

"Has the world been talking, then?" I asked, feebly.

"It has begun," he said; "but you can close its mouth now, if you like."

"If I like!" I repeated; "*if I like!* As though I would not do anything, adopt any measures—"

"Then you *will* cross to Dover?" he interrupted, eagerly.

"Yes," I answered; "I will take the next boat back."

He drew a long breath of relief, as if he had got through a difficult task more easily than he expected, and, lapsing into silence, looked steadily out seaward, like one who never meant to bring his eyes back to land, or speak again.

I felt the sympathy expressed in this abstinence from words. By slow degrees, also, the influence of the sorrowful landscape, of the loneliness, the solitude, the trouble of the fretting sea, laid soothing, softening hands upon my aching heart, and, but for very shame, I could have bowed my head and wept the bitterness of my grief away.

It would have added inconceivably to the weight of my affliction had it been seen by any other man than the one who stood beside me; but I knew no aggravation of the grief because he beheld it; rather, there seemed in his very presence strength and support.

"Smith," I said at last, "sit here beside me, will you?"

He complied instantly.

"Do you think me very—very foolish?" I went on.

"I don't think I know exactly what you mean," he answered.

"I mean, was it not a crazy thing for a man like me—an old man—"

"You are not an old man," he said; "and if you were, it would not make much difference."

"I am more than fifty years of age," I confessed, humbly.

"And what has that to do with it?" he asked. "I suppose I look old enough to be your father, and yet there is a most fascinating creature who has fixed her affections upon your humble servant. Rodewald says I might do worse."

I did not answer. His remark seemed to float me out upon an ocean of strange, unwonted thought and conjecture, in comparison to which the material waters stretching before my visible sight were a mere mill-pond.

"If you think it will do you any good to talk—talk," he began, after a brief pause; "*I shall not deem you foolish.*"

Nothing in the words but much in the manner. It was just as though he had said to some one grievously wounded, "Lean on me; you will rest more completely."

"You know how I first became acquainted with her?" I suggested.

"She told me," he answered; "but you can tell me also, if you think fit."

Ah! then the feelings so long restrained found vent. I spoke of that night—never to be forgotten so long as I preserved my memory. My heart talked to his heart. A lonely man, he could sympathise with my loneliness; he understood what the darkness of my life must have been; he could comprehend why I looked upon the girl who once stood a total stranger within my doorway, as a very angel of light.

The human being does not live who need have desired a better auditor. He did not interrupt, he did not question, he did not scoff; he only listened to all I had to say with that dreamy far-away look in his eyes; with his inscrutable face turned seaward; with his hands clasped idly between his knees, and his heels at intervals digging holes in the yielding sand.

I finished at last. There came, at length, a moment when even I felt the theme exhausted, unless I commenced *once more* at the beginning and went over it all again.

"Yes," he said, when I ended. "Yes—" and his eyes took a longer journey still over the gray rolling waves, that seemed to possess for him such a subtle and mysterious charm.

Suddenly he turned to me with a half smile.

"There are advantages in poverty, you see, after all," he remarked. "You have enough money now, and unlimited leisure at your disposal; but you never again can go through such an experience as that you have just described. It all occurred in Arcadia, in a land of freedom from every conventionality, in a state of life both men and women have to quit when once they begin to gather golden apples, and eat of that accursed tree of the knowledge of good and evil which is set in the midst of every human life. You were in Paradise then, and you were not aware of the fact; and now the cherubim with the flaming sword keeps constant watch and ward to make sure you never shall return to that state of blissful ignorance and childlike innocence for which you were not then in the slightest degree thankful."

"But I never entertained a thought, I give you my word—"

"Pooh?" he said, abrusquely stopping in an instant the defence I was about to make—the assurance I meant to give. "We are not in Arcadia now," he went on, taking no direct notice of my mortified indignation, "and had better consider the question from a common-sense point of view. The days are past, and you have been lifted out of that state of life and condition of mind in which it was possible for you to go about with a girl in the way you describe, and no great trouble come of it. No real trouble did come of it, even to you, because I am sure it is better for a man to have loved hopelessly than never to have loved at all. It is just the difference between life and death—between light and darkness."

I felt what he said was true; Lord, even in the midst of the sharp agony, I understood vaguely, but certainly, every emotion intended by his Maker the creature should experience, it is best for him to know. A life without love! a day without sun! a night without star! existence without hope! No; better any pain than the pain of a numbed heart—preferable to feel the keenest stab than to lie rigid in the trance of catalepsy.

"But what I want to convince you," he proceeded, "is that now, when you no longer wander the heights of Islington and pace the easy descents of Pentonville in the character of a gentle shepherd, you must bid adieu to all such pastoral delights as made then at once your happiness and your misery. You asked me a while since if I thought you foolish. No; but I think you wrong. No man ought to keep dangling after a married woman. I do not care how old he may be, or how young she; no good can come of it."

"But all I desired was to stand her friend, to be near if she needed help. You know what her husband is; you are well aware she has no one to turn to in her trouble."

"Granted," he answered; "but she cannot turn to you. Let her be in the greatest trouble, in what capacity would it be possible for her to ask your intervention?"

"As her friend," I said, firmly; "as her true faithful friend!"

"But you are not her friend," he insisted; "you are her lover."

"Do not say that!" I entreated, for the word struck upon my ear painfully; "it hurts me."

"Because you won't believe you are no longer in Arcadia—because you can't realise that you are in the world, in the midst of men and women. For Heaven's sake, look the position straight in the face. You love this woman; then, as a matter of course, you are her lover. You will answer, perhaps, that she does not care for you save as a friend, which is most likely the case; but do you suppose Mrs. Grundy's tongue will abate one bit of its venom on that account? All you can do for her now is to leave her—to put the silver streak—the streak does not look very silvery from here—between you and temptation. If you return to Paris you will find fifty good reasons why you must see her at once—see her every day. If you stay here you will discover you cannot leave without just saying 'Good-bye.' But when you are back in England you will not retrace your steps. You will think, 'If I can best serve her at a distance I will remain at a distance, though it break my heart to look on her sweet fair face no more.'"

I did not answer him, for I could not. I looked out over the sea, which at the moment seemed blurred and

indistinct before my eyes. He did not add another word, or disturb my reverie, but only scooped up handfuls of sand, and sifted the grains, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, through his fingers. At last he consulted his watch, put it back in his pocket, and observing, "Well I suppose, as we have said all there is to say, we may as well be moving," rose and waited for me to follow his example.

But I did not do so immediately.

"Smith—" I began.

"Yes; what is it?"

"Where *you* ever in love?"

He seemed as if he had not heard me, for he picked up a pebble and flung it far seaward without answering.

"*Were* you ever in love?" I repeated, looking up at him as he stood gaunt and ungainly between me and the tossing billows.

"O, yes!" he answered; "I have been through the mill."

"Tell me about it," I weakly entreated. I was in that maudlin hysterical state of mind in which it seems that to hear of another's sufferings must ease one's own.

"No, I don't think I will," was the reply. "It was a long while ago. It happened while I was still in time, and I think I must have passed through several eternities since. However, if you want a story, here is an outline for one, which you can fill in at your leisure. I loved and I lost—not a very original plot; but toss the human kaleidoscope, and see what pattern turns up."

"Was she very young when she died?" I asked, puzzled, for he did not speak with much sentiment about the matter.

"She did not die," he said; "there are a hundred means by which one may lose a woman in this world without her slipping quietly into the next. No, she did not die; she was beautiful, and I—well, no one except Rodewald's fair friend ever thought me anything save very much the contrary. Women like handsome lovers—I am sure I do not know why we should blame them—and, as you may have observed, I am not handsome, so she did not care for me; flung me over. Not much of a story, but enough for me."

I do not know if I have said before, my companion was a man who repelled sympathy.

He did not ask for it; if one offered it he declined the contribution with thanks. I had noticed this before, but it struck me now with a fresh and painful surprise and mis-giving. Would the man who made so light of all wounds, who was so uncommunicative about most of the subjects upon which his fellows were given to enlarge, think contemptuously of a poor creature like myself, who in the time of trial bore himself with such scant courage, and lacked even the dignity that might have impelled him to creep away quietly, and bear his pain in silence and alone?

I should have done this—most certainly yes—only that the blow he struck was dealt so swiftly and unexpectedly as to break down all old barriers of pride and self-restraint. Taken unawares, the cry so long repressed burst from me almost without my own consent or knowledge; and now, when the first bitterness of anguish so long pent up, so suddenly expressed, was subsiding, and leaving only the old dull sense of loss never to be replaced behind in its stead, I began to repent me of my confidence, and to wish this uncommunicative man's interest in affairs which really did not concern him had been stated at almost any other time, and in almost any other place, than the hour and the lonely stretch of desolate sea-shore he selected for his purpose.

If he had read my thoughts, as I believe he did, he could not have answered them much more explicitly than was the case.

As we strode along homewards—for his most leisurely pace required me to step out briskly to keep up with him—he brought his eyes back from a long, fixed gaze seaward, and remarked:

"We need not speak any more about this matter, need we? We have said all, I think there wanted to be said; and we have left unuttered many things which were in both our minds, and of which it is far better mention should not be made. Before we drop the subject, however, I should like to ask you one question. What do you mean to do now?"

"Do you mean when I return to England?"

"No, though I was going to talk about that later on. On *what terms* do you intend to place your—friendship—with *her*?"

"There is no alternative," I answered. "The only thing for me to do now is to write and bid her farewell for ever."

"I would not adopt that course," he said, quietly.

"Can you suggest any better?" I asked.

"Yes, I fancy so. You see, *she* knows nothing of all this—has not an idea of the state of your feelings. Why should you enlighten her? Any talk there may have been about the matter was but idle chatter. You stop it by leaving. No person besides yourself knows the real state of the case except me, and I am as good as nobody. If you had told your secret to the sea, it would not keep it one bit better than I shall. Make your mind quite easy on that point. There is nor man nor woman in whom I confide. I have my own affairs to attend to, and I shall forget yours by the time I awake to-morrow. In the life of every one there comes a moment when the heart, refusing to bear its load in silence any longer, cries out it can endure the agony no more. I know this is so even in my own experience; but after that one expression of pain, it can go on and bear seven times as much as it endured before. I do not think you quite understand me now; but the day must come when you will realise my meaning."

"Perhaps so," I answered, vaguely—for, indeed, all I felt was he wanted to soothe my pride and reassure my self-esteem; "but, meantime, you have only told me what you would not do were you in my place—not the course you should advise me to adopt."

"Some day," he said, "whether soon or late I cannot say, she will want a friend—one she can appeal to without a fear of giving trouble, or thought of wrong. You would not like to raise a barrier which should at such a crisis prevent her turning to you."

"God knows I would cut off my right hand first!"

"I am sure of it," said Mr. Smith. "Such, then, being the case, take my advice, and when you write—from England—write as if nothing had happened; nothing has, you know, really; keep her informed of your address; correspond regularly, if not frequently; just go on the same as of old, only with the silver streak which looks so remarkably muddy at the moment between you and the only woman you ever loved."

"Do not laugh at me!" I entreated.

"Laugh!" he said, "laugh! Would it amuse me, do you think, if I had you laid up on my hands, now, with measles or whooping cough? And yet it is not more certain if a man does not get over those disorders in childhood he will have them, and badly, in after years, than that, if he does not break his heart in boyhood about a pair of blue eyes or tresses black as the raven's wing, he will eat it out in later life for the love of some woman. And this woman is one who deserved a better fate than that she found. No, with all your affection, your sorrow for her cannot be greater than my pity. But now we are getting on ground we had better avoid," he said, suddenly changing his tone. "So all I will add to what we have already said is this: Do not leave her without a friend. Be as loyal to her in the future as you have been in the past, and if ever you think I can help either you or her, say so without hesitation. The world is not likely to be censorious concerning me; I am so poor a wretch as to be almost beneath its notice. Now let us push on."

I laid a detaining hand on his arm, for we were walking at the moment so fast I could scarcely get my breath.

"Smith," I said, breathing quicker than a man who has not left all thoughts of love behind him has a right to do—fact is, of late I had fared better, slept longer, led in every way so much more luxurious an existence than of yore, that, though I looked younger, though the burden of years had dropped in some indefinable way off my outward man, I felt physically actually older than before—"Smith, after a fashion I am rich now. Mr. Granton has enabled me to lay out some of my money to very great advantage. You know, also, how few are my wants, how very simple a life I lead; and—and—I have several hundreds at this moment lying idle that might be of use to you."

With a compassionate look, my companion clapped me on the back as he might a boy, and answered:

"What! is that legacy still burning your pocket? No, no; don't offer any part of it to me, for I won't have lot or share. Bless you I am naturally such a lazy beggar that, if once I began to live on charity and relapse into idleness, I should die in the workhouse—and, frankly I have no taste for the union. If when I am a few years older you have

acquired sufficient City influence to get me some quarters in a comfortable almshouse, I shall probably not refuse to avail myself of so desirable a refuge."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OLD SCENES.

BACK once more in London ; back in the old lodging where, on that never-to-be-forgotten morning in the long-ago past, we breakfasted—she and I together—and afterwards spent the sorrowfully happy day which marked an era in my life.

The house is the same, only shabbier than of yore—some houses in London have a way of growing inexplicably shabbier, dingier, and dirtier on very short notice ; my landlady is the same, and I imagine has not had a new cap during the period of my absence—at all events, though black, it has a look of extreme age and griminess one would have thought incompatible with its colour. She has had a hard time of it, she says (and, indeed, her appearance is such as to suggest the idea the time has been so hard as to prevent her going to bed, and preclude the possibility of washing herself), during the period that has elapsed since I saw her last. The garden is the same, but the grass is soaked and sodden with rain ; the walks are mere pools of water, the haulms of the scarlet-runners are littering the ground, and the creepers trailing their uncomfortable length over the borders, now bare of flower or leaf. There is a good drizzling rain beating against the glass, and the morsel of sky visible from where I sit is as gray and dull and hopeless as London sky can be.

Yet I am glad to feel myself in the old quarters again. Here, at least, I have her memory all to myself. The sweetest, tenderest, saddest recollection of my life is connected with this dull room. It was fine weather then—it is gray November now—and I, though poor, was happy, and never knew it till I awakened from my dream.

We never do know when we are happy, till afterwards. I am satisfied of that. We are only, paradoxical as it may

sound, contented when we are wishing for something, when we are stretching our hands out eagerly for that which is just beyond our grasp. I am not happy now—most miserable indeed ; and yet how much better off I must be considered in every worldly respect than when I was a drudging clerk at the beck and call of a dozen masters !

I look in the glass over the mantelpiece, which so often in the days departed held the reflection of a grave worn face of a spare elderly figure, and a different presentment is returned to me. A younger man seems to glance back—younger and better-looking, too, spite of the frightful distortion which that old wave in the poor cheap mirror always casts over one side of all human countenances—even making *her* sweet cheek appear to be drawn with tooth-ache. A younger man, with the old lines written by thought and poverty almost erased, and other writing traced across his features—travelled, well dressed, less odd in gait and manner—with something which once was part and parcel of himself gone, and something he never before possessed added.

More assured—less satisfied—not so diffident. “How improved you are !” *she* said to me one day ; “but I liked the old friend best, I think.”

I know now what she meant, though I failed to understand then. Looking in this crazy glass, the change wrought by time and circumstances becomes suddenly patent even to me. I have lost the simplicity and the guilelessness that kept me happy and contented when I was so lonely and so poor ; riches have wrought out their inevitable work, and robbed me of the peace of mind that was mine before Mr. Amriott's legacy came to make Reuben Cheverley, like his neighbours, somewhat suspicious, and a good deal dissatisfied.

The worst of return or meeting after any lengthened period is that it is never the same person that returns ; never the same friends which greet ; we do not bring the same eyes to look upon the familiar landscape ; the thoughts in our hearts are different as we clasp hands. In the pleasant monotony of daily intercourse the inevitable *change* in mind as well as in body is so gradual as to be almost imperceptible ; but when we remain absent for any long time from familiar haunts and people, we are startled

and disappointed on our return to find we cannot quite regard them as the haunts and people of old.

I found this the case, at any rate. Places did not seem the same to me. Men and women, too, appeared totally different. When I left my easy-chair in the accustomed lodgings, commenced the study of human nature instead of books, took to a life of leisure instead of a changeless existence of routine, I found I had lifted my anchor from safe, if unexciting waters, and permitted myself to drift out upon a very ocean of doubt and regret and perplexity.

The simple faith which had served me so well in a humbler walk failed now to satisfy my restless heart. Constantly I found myself questioning instead of listening; asking impatiently why such things were permitted, instead of obeying the injunction to go steadily on, hoping and believing. My own trials I could bear, but not the trials of others. With jaundiced eyes, I looked out upon the world, and as a doctor sees naturally in the healthiest subject disease, so I, foolish and prejudiced, beheld little save evil and wrong.

Whilst I stood in the valley I was safe enough; but now, mounted on a tiny hillock—a mere wormcast, as Smith once said contemptuously, when speaking of the height of experience I thought I had gained—I fancied I could see the universe, and was lofty enough to cavil at the ordination of Him who made the whole of it—valleys and mountains and worm-casts and human beings, and the dumb brutes human beings so shamefully misuse.

My first annoyance in London was not of a sentimental nature; quite the contrary. It came through Mr. Holway, and I ought to have felt grateful for his communication, which served to distract my mind from the one subject that usually engrossed my thoughts. I did not, however, feel at all grateful. Time, and, perhaps, my niece's ingratitude, had changed my views somewhat about this matter of helping one's neighbour.

"What," I said to Smith once, when we were discussing Holway and his affairs, "if one's neighbour won't be helped, can't be helped? if his impecuniosity has become chronic? if, after you have pushed him forward to-day, you find him again to-morrow in the old quagmire of debt and difficulty?"

"I see nothing for it," answered Smith, grimly, "but to go on helping him. Having once begun, you will find it extremely hard to leave off."

"But don't you think—" I was beginning, when he interrupted me.

"No, I don't; whatever you think on the old theme of debt, I am pretty sure to differ from. Yes, I know what you were going to ask. Don't I think Holway ought to live within his income? The man can't. When you go home, Cheverley, do a little rule-of-three sum, and take special notice of the result. How in the name of common sense is a fellow, burdened as he is, to make the two ends meet? The string must give somewhere."

"But I do not think—I speak, of course, subject to correction," I added, uneasily, for I saw his quizzical glance wandering over my face—"a person ought to incur liabilities he has no means of meeting."

Smith clapped me on the back.

"When a baby comes into the world it immediately incurs a number of liabilities it has not the faintest means of meeting, and yet few people find fault with the new-born infant for that. It, at any rate, feels quite content on the subject. It lies flat on its back and screams for something it has not got, or it crows with delight because somebody else has taken all trouble off its hands; but it never dreams of jotting down its liabilities on one side, and its assets on another. Now, in his way, Holway is a baby, the only difference being that he does not scream or crow. He is perfectly helpless; after he has tried all he can he finds himself slipping, slipping back."

"But really—though it is unpleasant to speak of the little I have been unable to do—I have tried to help him."

"I know you have, and you had better have followed his advice and let him alone. If you are not prepared to assist a man who works, and is willing to work, thoroughly, it is no true kindness to lengthen out the pecuniary torture."

I will say this much for Mr. Smith: he never dealt in compliments, at least to me.

When I returned to England, after that walk along the Calais sands, almost the first thing I heard was that Mr.

Holway had been to my solicitors, wanting to give me a bill of sale over his effects.

Those worthy gentlemen considered the matter, and decided the proposed security would be of little use. In the first place, if he were made bankrupt it would not avail me, as at that time such deeds had to grow to a certain age before they became valid; and in the second, if he were not bankrupt, they knew the bill of sale would involve to me a certain amount both of trouble and expense.

"You see, Mr. Holway," they said, "unless a person is prepared to act upon a bill of sale, it is no security to him; it is only a security to the debtor against another creditor."

"That is just why I am here," he said. "There is one of my acceptances coming due, and, unless it is paid, Rodewald, or Rodewald's principal, will sweep the ground clear."

"Even under those circumstances we do not feel we could advise Mr. Cheverley to take a bill of sale. Why not let *him* sweep the ground?"

"I only wish he would," answered Holway.

Now, this conversation, when repeated, vexed me greatly. I hoped, with the help I had afforded, he would be able to "pull through;" and I knew perfectly well even the simple dialogue just narrated would appear, eventually, in a sort of three-volume edition, in my bill, and be charged out, at a length and cost incredible to the uninitiated.

Never having lost the economical instincts of my struggling clerkship, I, therefore, immediately I was settled again in Islington, wrote to Leytonstone, and begged Mr. Holway to communicate direct with me for the future.

No long time elapsed before a direct communication reached me. It is almost needless to state there was a mortgage over his land; the interest had fallen behind, and the mortgagees meant to foreclose.

Swift on the heels of this letter—whilst, indeed, I was considering what could be done for the unfortunate man—followed another epistle, which ran thus:

"I have received notice from the office, and shall have to leave this day month. Truly misfortunes never come singly."

"Come," I thought, "here at least I may be able to help you to some purpose. I will ask Mr. Fairboy to use his influence in your favour;" and forthwith I wrote

a note to Mr. Holway, entreating him not to be disheartened, and stating I should make a point of seeing Mr Fairboy on the subject at once.

Before, almost, I could have imagined this letter reaching Leytonstone, there came an answer back from Mr. Holway, stating it would be time and trouble thrown away to try and get his dismissal reconsidered.

"It was decided upon long ago, I have reason to believe," he said, "and the board were only waiting a decent pretext to get rid of me. Palmett and Hardnail are on the direction, and the office, of course, is swarming with protégés of their own. If the law business of the 'Home and Foreign' is not already transferred from Messrs. Greatchild & Co. it is going to be."

Certainly, as matters stood, it did not seem as though any interference of mine was likely to produce much fruit; still, as it so happened the premium on the small insurance I had long previously effected for Bessie's benefit fell due just then, I thought I would call at the office, and put in a good word for Holway, if the chance presented itself.

As I entered the familiar portals, the manager came hurrying in after me, almost catching himself between the swinging doors in his eagerness to welcome my return.

"And how is Mr. Cheverley?" he exclaimed, seizing me by the hand, and shaking it till every bone tingled with the warmth of his greeting. "I thought I could not be mistaken. I said to myself, 'Surely that is our old friend turning the corner;'" and, having delivered himself of this speech, he held me at arm's length, and contemplated me with admiring attention.

"Not a day older," he said, in audible soliloquy; "younger, younger—much younger. But come into my room," he added, "and tell me the latest news from the Continent;" which last word he pronounced, in a light and airy way, "continong."

I looked round the office, and, though all the clerks' faces wore an almost painful expression of preoccupation and earnestness, I knew the ways of the fraternity too well to doubt what would happen the moment our backs were turned.

However, their gibes and jeers did not matter much to me; so, speaking a few words to those with whom I had

been previously acquainted, I preceded the manager into his room, whither he indicated the way by a gracious wave of his hand.

"Have a glass of sherry," he said; "you know I always keep a bottle here, so as to take a little when the directors have been a trifle trying. Don't say no, Mr. Cheverley."

I did not say no, because I remembered Holway's dilemma; otherwise assuredly that glass of sherry had never been tasted by me.

"And so," went on the manager quite in a casual sort of way, producing a tumbler and, in order doubtless to put me quite at my ease, half-filling it for himself with the liquor he affected, "so we are going to lose your friends and our highly-esteemed solicitors. I am very sorry for it—candidly, now, I am truly grieved. *The* most honourable, *the* most high-minded, *the* most gentlemanlike of men: 'Take them for all in all, we ne'er,' et cetera. Between ourselves—strictly *entre nous*, as you say in France—the changes which have taken place since your accession to fortune are not all to my mind—the office is not what it used to be; and, candidly, if a proposition were made to me to retire on a sufficient pension, I do not think I would stand in the way of a younger man."

"The office would miss you," I murmured; for he looked at me so hard, I felt comment of some kind to be necessary.

"Well, so it would," he argued; "I flatter myself I have been a good servant."

"None could have been better," I said, feeling thankful to be able to speak the literal truth. He had proved faithful to the "Home and Foreign."

"I have nothing to say against the new directors, of course," he continued. "Men of wealth and position, possessed of business habits, regular, upright, and so forth; but we have our prejudices—you have yours, and I have mine, and they have theirs; you understand me, of course."

I said I thought I did; adding, with a candour foreign to my general habits, Messrs. Hardnail & Palmett were not persons I should care to be under.

"Hush, hush;" he entreated; "it is as well never to mention names. Caution, sir, caution has been the rule of

my life ; but," he added, after this general statement, "but I am under neither of the persons you mention. I lead them by the nose, sir."

Here seemed my opportunity.

"I hope, then, you will exert your influence in favour of poor Holway. I have been very sorry to hear he is under notice to leave."

"Yes, it is a bad business," said the manager, his brow contracting as he spoke.

"How did it happen?" I asked. "What has he done or left undone?"

"He cut his own throat," was the figurative reply. "I never did care much for Holway. I never had the same feeling towards him as I felt for—for some others in the office," with a bland smile and bow in my direction, emphasising the not very obscure meaning he desired to convey ; "he was always a 'hands off' sort of individual ; to my mind he lacked tact and manners. But still, his was an old face and a long service ; and I have tried—I give you my word of honour, Mr. Cheverley, I could not have tried more for that man if he had been my brother."

From my knowledge of the manager's ideas on the subject of relationship, this did not seem a difficult statement to swallow, and I therefore inclined my head in ready acceptance of its truthfulness.

"I have stood between him and the consequences of his folly times out of number," went on the manager, warming with his subject ; "I have said to him, 'Why *will* you try to throw yourself out of a berth? Why *cannot* you be decently civil to your superiors? Why *do* you let duns and people of that sort lie in wait for you at the door of the office? Why *don't* you endeavour to dress a little better, and to wear a hat a *little* less the worse for wear than that hanging up on the peg? Sir Ahab was saying to-day your hat was a perfect disgrace to the establishment.'"

"And Holway?" I suggested, interrogatively, as his would-be benefactor paused for breath.

"Holway answered rudely that it did not matter much what he did or what he wore, so long as a set was being *made* to get him out of the office. 'Old Palmett,' he said, '*want's* my stool for a nephew of his wife's, and it won't be long before I get marching orders.'"

"The result seemed to imply a considerable amount of prescience on the part of Holway," I observed.

"Well, I don't know ; it is often competent for a man to work out the fulfilment of his own prophecy ; at all events, that is what he has done."

"How did he manage it ?"

"Simply enough. The other day, it seems, Palmett had occasion to call close by the Dragon and Grasshopper, in the next street ; you know the house, perhaps ?"

"Yes," I said, "I know the house."

"Well, as ill-luck would have it, just as Palmett was stepping from his brougham Holway came out of the bar, wiping his mouth, and was hurrying away when Palmett called after him,

" 'Hulloa, you sir !'

"Holway turned, and came slowly back.

" 'You've been drinking,' said Palmett.

" 'No, I haven't,' answered Holway.

" 'Don't dare tell falsehoods to me !' cried Palmett, all out in the open street.

" 'It is not a falsehood,' said Holway, 'I have been having some gin-and-bitters ; but that is not drinking.'

"There was a good deal more, but the upshot of the whole thing proved Holway got his orders to right-about-face. I said to him, 'Now, *why* couldn't you keep yourself cool ? Why *did* you answer Mr. Palmett so disrespectfully ? You *ought* to have considered your wife and family. I am sure if *I* indulged in the same license as you do, it would be impossible to say what would become of *me*.'

"So I suppose it is quite a settled thing," I suggested, as the manager paused, "and that your directors would not be disposed to reconsider the case ?"

"No, that they would not," was the decisive answer. "As I told you at the first, Holway has cut his own throat."

"It seems hard lines, too, considering the length of time he has worked for very little money," I said. "What on earth will he do now ? You see the man must live."

"Hum, I suppose so," assented the manager, doubtfully—perhaps, like his famous prototype, he did not perceive the necessity—"but, at all events, he need not live on *gin-and-bitters*."

I did not make any answer. It seemed, indeed, vain to discuss the question further; so, saying good-morning, I left the office, followed to the door by my friend, who was so delighted with the hit he considered he had made that he repeated, in a whisper, on the threshold,

"Not on gin-and-bitters—ha! ha!"

As I left the office a feeling of total downheartedness came over me. Holway's desk was vacant, and Cathcart, who had got stout and—if one might use such an expression with regard to any connection of the Palmett clique—bloated, glanced significantly towards the empty place, and, with a sufficiently intelligible gesture, conveyed to me the absent clerk's occupation, and where he might at that moment most probably be found.

I wanted to talk to some sensible person concerning Holway's affairs. I desired to get the taste of that dry sherry out of my mouth, and the memory of the manager's conversation out of my head. As Baxter said, when he saw a poor wretch on his way to the gallows, "But for the grace of God, there goes Richard Baxter;" so I felt, with a nervous shudder, but for my fortunate legacy, I might, when old and feeble, have been handed down as Holway had been; the cut of my clothes found fault with, my methodical habits derided, my modest half-pint of beer accounted an extravagance, and the frequenting of second-hand bookstalls—a sin! It all came very bitterly before me, as I wended my way slowly back towards Islington. Every feeling in my nature seemed to rise in antagonism against Messrs. Hardnail & Palmett, and the "Home and Foreign" generally. Never previously had I so thoroughly desired to help the one clerk who I knew certainly tried faithfully to do his duty—to make matters smoother for him, and try if he could not be weaned of a habit it was scarcely for me to condemn, still conscious, as I could not but be, of the exceeding dryness of the manager's sherry; and yet I totally failed to see how I could tender any assistance likely to be of permanent service.

"If Smith were but in London, I would take his advice," I considered. "I do not know any man whose advice I would sooner take than Smith's."

But then he was in Paris, and I in dear, dreary, smoky

London, which, spite of its dreariness and smokiness, I was growing again to love as much as ever.

"Yes, the Channel parts us," I thought, with a sigh, as I opened the door of my lodgings, and walked into the parlour.

Could I believe my senses? There, in my own room, in my chair, reading a book I had picked up a few days previously, sat, or rather lay, Smith—his long legs stretched out in luxurious repose, his head resting against the back of the chair, his solemn face wearing an expression of the deepest melancholy, and my landlady's cat fast asleep on his knee.

"Why, Smith," I exclaimed, in astonishment, "what in the world brings you here?"

It might not seem a cordial greeting, but it served. When I spoke he gathered his somewhat ungainly figure together, and, rising, grasped my hand with more than his usual cordiality.

"I had business in London," he said, "and a message to thee, O king. Nay, do not draw back; I am not going to serve you the same scurvy trick Ehud did Eglon. Sit down, and I will tell you all about her."

What he told me was of little import to this story, but it refreshed and gladdened me. He said that which he had to say on the subject lying nearest my heart, tenderly and sympathetically. When he had finished, we drifted imperceptibly into other subjects, and at last I spoke about Holway, and the difficulty in which I was placed.

"What am I to do with him?" I asked, despairingly. "You know how earnestly I desire to extricate him from all his troubles, and yet it seems an almost hopeless task."

Mr. Smith rose, and, plunging his hands deep in his pockets, began pacing the carpet. It was but a small room, and, it seemed to me, the space from door to fireplace, from window to wall, served him but for a single stride.

Perhaps he felt this himself; for, after a turn or two, he stood for a minute silent, looking out into the garden, where the twilight was already stealing down, and then, returning slowly to his chair, threw himself into it once more.

"There is only one thing you can do for Holway," he

said, as though no pause had ensued between my question and his answer, "and that is to persuade him to emigrate. If you took him out of Rodewald's hands this week he would get into them again next. There is no hope for such a man while he stops in England. Talk the matter over with Mrs. Holway, and get some sort of notion of how they are really situated, if you can. It will give you pleasing and sufficient employment for a good while to come, or I am greatly mistaken. The hank of tangled silk in the old fairy tale was nothing, I expect, to the muddle in which you will find his affairs. That is a nice little crib he owns out at Leytonstone. Have you ever been there?"

"Yes, once. Poor fellow, he would not like to leave it."

"Can't help himself."

"Do you think so?"

"Sure so. Once a man gets amongst the usurers he can only escape by slipping his skin, and very often not even then. Further, mortgaging, like pledging, is apt to become chronic. Rely upon it, were Holway's place free to-day, he would endeavour to raise five hundred pounds on the title-deeds to-morrow."

"What, then, do you think would be my best course?"

"Do not commit yourself to any. Go and see how the land lies, and then let us talk matters quietly over together."

It was good advice. I often wondered how a man, capable of giving such sound counsel to others, should have contrived to plunge into such a bog of difficulties as that from which he seemed quite unable to extricate himself, and unwilling to let any one else giving him a helping hand. The more we know of our fellow-creatures the more they seem to perplex us. At all events, Mr. Smith perplexed me. When I began to speculate concerning his antecedents and his story—for that his life held one I felt satisfied—I soon lost myself in a perfect sea of conjecture.

When I went to Leytonstone, which I did the very next day, everything turned out precisely as Smith had prophesied it would do—complication upon complication; interest on the top of interest; loan heaped high on loan;

all credit in the neighbourhood stopped; cattle about to be sold for lack of the wherewithal to feed them; ground lying fallow for want of money to buy seed; the children within doors, because their clothes were too shabby to go out; and yet Mrs. Holway quite ready to listen to an exceedingly flattering tale, whispered to her at sight of me, by Hope, that arch-deceiver, the burden of which I soon found to be, a very few hundred pounds would set them all to rights again, *because*, once her husband left the "Home and Foreign," his time would be at his own disposal, and the master's eye would cause the steed to fatten and the corn to spring.

From the very depths of despair she ascended almost immediately, and, taking me round the farm, pointed out what could be done with a little money here and a few pounds there. It hurt me to check her expectations, yet I could not forbear asking how she supposed the two ends could be made to meet without the help of her husband's salary when they had never met with it.

"Well, you see, things are different now," she answered. "The children are growing up."

I had not the courage to add, "and doing nothing," but I felt sadly there was little to be done with Mrs. Holway.

"A plucky woman," thus Smith summed her up: "but she never sees beyond next week. I don't think she sees beyond to-day. Will face any present trouble with spirit, but has not an idea how to avert the coming of future disasters."

Finding this the case, I concluded to wait the return of Mr. Holway, who greeted me with,

"You here! I hope you have come to arrange about clearing everything off the place." It was not a cheerful remark, and possibly he did not exactly intend what he said, or expect me to act up to its literal meaning; but it gave me an opportunity for saying what was in my mind, and so I told him plainly that, with all the will in the world to assist him, I did not feel inclined to throw good money after bad; that I had looked at his land and his stock, and heard a great deal from Mrs. Holway about his embarrassments, and that it did not seem to me—I put *the matter as delicately as I could*—any good purpose was

to be served by struggling on against such overwhelming odds. "It is really only lengthening out the torture to defer the evil day," I added, quoting Smith quite unconsciously; "for I fear it must come, do what you will to try to avert it."

"That is what I told you at first," he said. "I knew it was bound to come."

"But you can soon get another situation," put in Mrs. Holway, looking hard at me, though her words were addressed to her husband.

I did not answer, but looked hard at him.

"No," he replied, slowly. "No, Milly, you are wrong; I shall not get another situation worth having in a hurry. People want references, and I know pretty well what would be said about me; besides," he added, bitterly, "a berth of that sort unfits a man to undertake other work. If I was turned loose in a merchant's office, I declare to you I should not know what to be at. I am getting an old dog, and it is hard, not merely to learn new tricks, but to unlearn those of years. How long have I been in that office, Mr Cheverley, a matter of twenty years, I suppose."

I said yes, I supposed so, though I winced a little—I had felt quite an old stager when first he entered the "Home and Foreign."

"And what I am to do I am sure I cannot tell," he added, despondently. "But I must not be troubling you;" he went on next moment, "though you are rich now and above the world, I'll be bound you have troubles to bear like the rest of us."

I could not deny it. I could have told him I had one sorrow, at all events, I found very hard to bear. I wonder whether, if he had known what it was, he would have laughed aloud at the recital of my folly?—he, the man I had tried to help; or rather, I do not wonder, for I know. Those who, like Smith, are able to understand the heart-ache a man no longer young can suffer are few indeed!

"The worst of it is," said Mr. Holway, instantly reverting to his own trouble, as we are all so apt to do, "that that fellow Rodewald will somehow manage to secure this place. He has long had his eye upon it. I saw him one day in the summer skulking along the lane, and taking in every detail. I ran round the back way, and, cutting off a

piece of the road, met him. 'He was just going to Snaresbrook,' he said; 'which was his best way? And so I lived here—really! What a snug little box, and handy besides to the City!' Damn him!" finished Mr. Holway, with fervour. Indeed, there was a whole Commination Service contained in that single remark.

Now was my time. I had been considering the matter ever since I walked round the farm with Mrs. Holway, and I felt pretty sure, when Smith advised me to come out to Leytonstone, he did so with an ulterior object in his head. If I ever meant to speak out, I felt I must speak at once.

"Holway," I said, "why don't you sell the whole place, stock, lock, and barrel, and emigrate? Your children would be a help to you in a new country, and they must be an expense for many a year to come in England."

He did not answer me for a minute, but, starting up, walked to the fireplace, which was guiltless of a fire, and leaned his head against the mantelshelf, whilst a dead silence prevailed in the little room.

Then,

"Who would buy it?" he asked, in a tone of almost fierce inquiry, lifting his haggard face, across which I fancied I could see the first beams of a new hope dawning. "Who would give anything for it, cumbered with the mortgage you know has been eating the heart out of everything it produced?"

"I would," I answered. "I don't want to drive a bargain with you, Holway. I don't desire your place if you believe you can keep it, and pull through; but if you feel the fight is too much for you, and the battle of life in England too hard, let me buy the freehold, and help you to begin existence again on better lines in some country where living is easier than you have found it here."

He went straight to the door and opened it. "Milly," he cried to his wife, who had, poor soul, left us some time previously on hospitable cares intent, as I found a little later on, when bidden to partake of tea; "Milly, come here."

She came all in a flurry, good true wife, not knowing what could have happened.

"Stand there," he said, placing her on one side of a narrow table, "and tell me how should you like to go

abroad, and cut all this tangle of debt, difficulty, wakeful nights, wretched days, and begin again quite afresh ? ”

“ I do not know what you mean,” she said, trembling a little.

“ Tell her what *you* mean,” he answered, turning to me, and speaking a little rudely, perhaps ; but that was ever Holway’s worst fault. “ Heavens ! ” he added, *sotto voce*, “ it is just as if an angel had come to lead us out of the darkness into light.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

BESSIE’S LOVER.

It was during the time occupied by Mr. Holway in winding up his affairs, transferring his small farm to me, and preparing to leave a country where he certainly had never, within my knowledge, prospered, that I happened to receive a visit from Mr. Dodman.

He came into my sitting-room, announced by the maid-of-all-work simply as “ A gentleman, sir,” and before I could utter a word, had grasped me by the hand, and stated how delighted he felt to make my acquaintance.

“ Though I never saw Mr. Cheverley before,” he said, “ I have long known him—known him as a friend ; ” and he shook my hand again.

Modestly I murmured something in acknowledgment of this too flattering address, no part of which did it lie within my power to return.

I had seen Mr. Dodman often. The moment he entered the room I recognised him as a person who was always about the City, generally in company with some one who looked more or less disreputable, generally more, rather than less ; who greeted his acquaintances in a hail-fellow-well-met sort of style, usually announcing his proximity by a thump on the back, or a hand laid facetiously on the lapel of a coat. O yes, I had seen him in the London streets for twenty years, at any rate ; a red-faced, loud-talking, loud-laughing individual, fond of turning into taverns and proposing “ glasses of sherry ; ” given to consort with men

who, whatever else they lacked, generally seemed to have money enough to "stand treats," and bet bottles of champagne, and jump into cabs and tear about town, and drive off to the different railway stations, as if their whole time was spent in going to and fro upon the earth, seeking whom they might devour, like a certain scriptural character I need not more particularly mention.

Owing to some peculiarity in my temperament, I find, even in the better ranks of life, the genial man who salutes one with a laugh, and utters some *bon mot* at the very moment of asking after one's health, almost as abhorrent to my feelings as the jovial individual who from afar shouts out his noisy greeting, and asks, within the first instant, "What will you take?"

When I was at the "Home and Foreign" we had always upon our direction, as a rule, some gentleman considered by the world at large a perfect acquisition, who made puns, who poked irrational jokes at the messenger and porter—irrational, because those functionaries did not dare to return the pleasantry in kind—who waxed facetious if a clerk made a mistake, and threw our manager into convulsions over witticisms so poor a child would have been ashamed to laugh at them.

From causes the reader will wot of, I never could find any fun in these proceedings, and, in like manner, it had been always impossible for me to enter into cordial relations with men who laughed horse-laughs, and stood amicably drinking at the bars of public-houses, and chaffed barmaids, and called the drivers of omnibuses by their Christian names, and went up and down Cornhill and Threadneedle Street arm-in-arm with members of their own fraternity, very much out at elbows, and concocting fresh means of raising the wind.

For these reasons, and others more personal, though perhaps less easy of explanation, I felt by no means rejoiced to make the acquaintance of Mr. Dodman. Unless he spoke very falsely, however—which probably he did, since I found subsequently truth was not one of Mr. Dodman's strongest points—the delight he experienced was more than sufficient to make up for any deficiency on my part.

Had I spent all Mr. Amriott's legacy in feeding the poor

—had I denuded myself of every sixpence; and gone about the world as hungry and naked as any old-time saint—had I been a Howard or a Mrs. Fry, Mr. Dodman could not have said or hinted more in praise of my philanthropy.

If a man of his type can ever exhaust himself, which I doubt, my visitor must have achieved that feat within a few minutes of his entrance; and it was impossible to stop the flow of his eloquence, not only because he had a way of talking which bore down all opposition, but because he did not address me direct, delivering his discourse to an entirely imaginary auditor, and cutting from under my feet the vantage ground of reply.

At length, however, in a lull of his eloquence, I did contrive to edge in a question.

"How was Mrs. Dodman?"

"Mrs. Dodman," he answered, "is as usual, I thank you. She is never well."

As I looked at him, the thought crossed my mind, he must have absorbed the health of twenty people. My strength would soon have turned to weakness had I been compelled to breathe the same atmosphere as Mr. Dodman for twenty-four hours. It seemed to take the whole air of a room to fill his capacious lungs.

"And how is my niece?" I asked, feeling no desire to hear all about Mrs. Dodman's ailments. From fatal experience, I knew men of this sort have no reticence on medical subjects, or, indeed, on any other.

"Our dear little 'Rosy-posy,' as we call her!" exclaimed Mr. Dodman, effusively, "the greatest blessing ever crossed our poor threshold, all life and animation. You have not seen her for some time? No? Well, you won't recognise her now. She is a lovely girl, positively lovely; as happy as a grig, lively as a cricket; being with young people has been the making of her."

"What transformation has occurred?" I thought; but I only said I was, indeed, glad to hear Mr. Dodman's report.

"I knew you would," he answered, in a tone which implied he had been discussing the subject with at least a hundred persons, each one of whom held an antagonistic opinion. "I knew you would, and—thank you, thank

you." At this moment I managed to interpolate a request for him to be seated. "And as I was saying," he went on, with a keen glance round the room in search of any stray decanter or bottle of spirits, "you will be more glad to hear what I have come to tell you. What do you think of the young lady having made a conquest?"

"Young ladies generally do make conquests," I answered, awkwardly enough; for, indeed, the way Mr. Dodman looked at me with one eye cocked knowingly under the brim of his hat, which he had not removed—being, as I supposed, so accustomed to live in taverns, he had forgotten the customs usually observed in private houses—was enough to have discomposed a bolder man than myself, "Don't they?"

"Well, in a fashion, perhaps," he agreed; "but not such a conquest as this, and quite by accident. There's no position she may not look forward to confidently. You'll see your niece riding in her carriage some day, Mr. Cheverley." And once again Mr. Dodman, feeling, no doubt, the tap of his eloquence was running dry, looked around him in search of some accustomed stimulant.

To his manifest discomposure I ventured to hint that riding in a carriage did not seem to me to be the be-all and end-all of existence—that it was possible for Care to sit behind even a pair of horses; and, in fine, if the man of Bessie's choice were an honest young fellow, and likely to make her happy, I thought they might very well content themselves with the mode of locomotion Nature has so generously provided for us all.

"He's everything you could desire, and more," said Mr. Dodman, emerging from the gloom into which the first expression of my "old-fashioned" ideas had plunged him. "A handsome, straightforward, honourable, likely young fellow as ever—" Mr. Dodman paused, evidently at a loss for a comparison, and then finished somewhat lamely—"asked an uncle to give him his niece. He has a good salary, good prospects. There is not a drawback, so far as I can see."

On the face of it the matter did undoubtedly bear a fair aspect, but I had my doubts whether under all this smiling exterior there might not be lurking something Mr. Dodman desired to conceal from my notice.

So far he had not said who or what this paragon of a suitor might be, and, in order to get some firm sort of ground under my feet, I ventured to ask his name.

"When I mention it you will be amazed," answered Mr. Dodman, posing himself to watch me while under the influence of astonishment, "though you know him very well."

"Know him?" I repeated. "I think you must be mistaken; it is not at all likely."

"O, but it is," he declared, waggishly nodding his head with an air of mysterious superiority, which, at the moment, seemed extremely exasperating. "What should you say, now, to a young gentleman of your acquaintance connected with the Mansion House, and hand and glove with all the City nobs whose surname commences with a C?"

"Do you mean Cathcart?" I asked, quietly, though I was, indeed, as much astonished as if a shell had exploded at my feet.

"—I mean—Cathcart—and—no—other," he answered, carefully dividing each word from its preceding fellow. "I knew you would be thunderstruck. *Now* what do you say?"

"I do not know that it is necessary for me to say anything," I replied; "the matter seems to have been settled without the slightest reference to me, and I need not, therefore, express any opinion concerning it."

"I thought you would be a bit offended about not being consulted," said Mr. Dodman, jauntily. "That was one reason why I offered to break the news to you myself. Of course, it is natural you should be put out at first; but, Lord love you, it would not have been in reason for the girl to keep her lover waiting for an answer while you were wandering about the Continent."

There is a way of "putting things" which most persons find extremely difficult to answer; and the way Mr. Dodman placed this delicate matter might have taxed the powers of an even more argumentative individual than myself. Nevertheless, in an access of sheer desperation, born unquestionably of the certainty that if I gave my visitor an inch he would at once take many ells, I managed to remark,

"I have never wandered beyond the reach of the post,

and that Bessie had always known where a letter would find me."

Mr. Dodman leaned forward, stretched out his hand, and tapped me soothingly on the arm.

"Look back a bit," he suggested, "we won't say how many years—there's no need to be over-particular on the point—to the last time you were in love yourself."

I felt myself change colour; the words were so unexpected that they struck me with the force of a blow, and brought the blood, which, at my age, should have flowed more sluggishly, in a crimson torrent to cheeks and brow.

"Ah, I see I've touched you!" exclaimed Mr. Dodman, triumphantly. "I flatter myself I know something of the ins and outs of human nature. Lord bless you, whether we're young or old, soft as pap or hard as steel with being hammered by experience on the world's anvil, we all remember the little girl we kissed under the mistletoe, or, better still, as we walked home after evening service. Well, to be sure, it makes one feel for the time young again. But, as I was saying, before you kissed the little girl, whoever she may have been, would you have stopped to write to the Continent for leave? or gone home first to ask your mother if you might? No, no, my dear sir," finished Mr. Dodman, with a twist of the mouth, which was quite characteristic, being at once jovial, persuasive, and superior, "you wouldn't—you didn't;" and he nodded and winked, and dug two fingers into my ribs.

"But, Mr. Dodman," I observed, withdrawing myself as civilly as I could beyond reach of his too ready hand, "the question before us is not—if I rightly grasp your meaning—one of kissing, but of marriage."

"Now, you've hit it exactly," answered my father-in-law who would have been, had things gone smoothly; "that's the point to which we must now devote our attention. So far as billing and cooing is concerned, we may safely leave the young people to themselves; but when it comes to marrying—by Jove!" and Mr. Dodman was so appalled by the magnitude of this part of the business that, with the exclamation just recorded, he stopped dead short, and left me to take up the running, if I felt so inclined.

But, in good truth, I did not feel so inclined: knowing perfectly well the end to which all these preliminaries were

tending, I thought it best to play a waiting game, and let the lover's emissary throw out his best court-card before I trumped his trick.

He looked at me, as if expecting I should speak. I did not speak, however. So forced to say something, he went on as if in continuation of his last sentence :

"And yet, upon my soul, I don't see why they shouldn't marry at once. They're young, and they're fond, and they've both got their wits about them. He has tip-top friends, willing to give him a helping hand up any ladder he sets himself to mount. She has an uncle who has made her happiness the aim and object of his unselfish life."

Even this eulogy of my humble self failed to "draw me," as Mr. Dodman would have expressed the matter. What I wanted was to force him to say, in plain words, what he and Cathcart and Bessie expected at my hands. That they had settled the amount of dowry I ought to give, I knew as well as if I had heard the whole matter discussed ; but it was not for me to forestall the statement of their wishes. I felt I could wait, and I did.

Mr. Dodman looked at me curiously. Then his blood-shot eyes wandered with watery anxiety round the room in quest of liquor. He was just arriving at a state of mind in which, had any decanter been visible, he would have helped himself without waiting for formal invitation ; but his longing gaze met with nothing to satisfy him, so he was forced to fall back upon his own unassisted impudence.

"You don't seem over-gratified, Mr. Cheverley," he said, in a tone which would have been bullying had prudence not held the speaker in check. "I am sure I thought, when I told you my news, you would be ready to jump out of your skin with delight. Perhaps you have been looking higher for your niece than a man connected with the best people in the City—a man, by George, sir, lords might associate with, and feel they were not demeaning themselves ; a young fellow of parts, who is certain to get on—certain as that the sun will rise to-morrow morning ; handsome, ready, the sort of chap a duke needn't be ashamed to introduce as his son-in-law. There's only one thing *against* him, and that, I am sure, ought not to weigh with *you*. He is a clerk ; but he is a clerk in an office you sat *in yourself*, and where you might be still if it had not been

for that legacy you deserved so well. Lord knows, though, we can't all expect legacies. I only wish we could. It would not be difficult for me to indicate one house where the master could do with a few thousands, and feel very grateful even for hundreds."

"I scarcely understand, Mr. Dodman," I said, "where all this tends. You have come here to-day very kindly, and possibly at some inconvenience, to tell me Bessie and Cathcart are engaged, and you seem to feel amazed I do not express the amount of pleasure you anticipated. Frankly, the news has not filled me with delight; but, as the matter is settled, it is not necessary for me to damp the happiness of the young people with objections I should, under any circumstances, have, perhaps, no right to raise."

"Hang me if I know what to make of you!" observed Mr. Dodman, with a smile and laugh, neither which was as genuine as his irritated tone. "Come now, be reasonable, do; look at the matter from a sensible point of view. What are you waiting for? What do you expect? I have not a word to say about niece that is not in her praise; still, I know—and you know—she is not everybody's money. There, I have been frank with you. Now you be frank with me. Nobody can say I don't speak out my mind. I think it was only the second time I ever met Mary Jubb, my wife as is now, she remarked—I had ventured to make some observation she considered rather too personal—'Lor,' you are plain, Mr. Dodman!' 'But I'm very pleasant, my dear,' I answered, just like that, off-hand; and, faith, she thought me so pleasant when I asked her would she take me altogether, she blushed, and whispered, 'Yes,' in a minute. Goodness gracious, how these foolish young people do take us back to the time we were young and foolish ourselves! How is it to be, Mr. Cheverley?"

"That, I gather, the foolish young people have already decided," I answered, ignoring Mr. Dodman's estimate of himself, his opinion of Bessie, and the pleasing anecdote of his own courtship.

I had brought him to book at last. He could stand what he called this beating about the bush and shilly-shallying between two men "who knew the world" no longer.

"See now, Mr. Cheverley," he finished, "it would have been gratifying to me to hear you say, 'Well, if they make a match of it, I'll do so and so;' but still, when a girl's happiness is at stake, no one shall say I considered my private feelings in preference to her welfare. So, in a word, I'll tell you what I want to be at. What help do you see your way to giving them, now? Of course, I know she's your only relation; and being so, I don't inquire the amount she may expect to inherit some day—some long day, I hope—hence. They are willing to begin in a humble way; but still, you will like, I feel sure, to enable them to start comfortably."

"So far as that is concerned"—I was beginning when Mr. Dodman stopped me.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "for interrupting you; but have you a drop of spirits anywhere handy? I really have gone through so much lately, that I cannot talk long on any subject on which my mind is concentrated without requiring some tonic. My doctor tells me it is Nature craving for nerve-food, and that I never ought to neglect her appeal. 'Just a nip,' he says, 'when you feel the sinking you describe. The body is precisely like a watch,' he explained: 'it wants winding up, or it won't go.' A very neat illustration, I thought at the time," finished my visitor, who, as I knew, was in the habit of winding himself up very often indeed.

I rang the bell and ordered what he required; and then, while he proceeded to take not merely one "nip," but many, I told him all I felt disposed to do in the way of helping Bessie to "start comfortably."

My words evidently affected him like a cold douche, and he was obliged to put a good deal of brandy in his water to counteract the effect of the chill. Quite hospitably he pressed me to follow his example. "You need it, I know," he said, dogmatically. "Don't tell me! all men need it;" and then, to show that he was not afraid of carrying his theory into practice, he helped himself to some more—wisely, without waiting to be asked.

"Come, come," he remonstrated, "you needn't stand on ceremony with me. We are quite old friends after a fashion, *though* we have not spoken till to-day; and you needn't be *shy* with me. We understand each other. Just wash your *throat*—do; you'll feel all the better for it;" and he

pushed the decanter towards me in what he would have styled, I suppose, his "rough and ready" manner.

"I have no taste for stimulants, Mr. Dodman," I said, apologetically. "My head won't stand them."

"Ah, I am thankful mine will," he answered. "I do not know what would become of me if it wouldn't."

Totally unable to solve this fresh enigma, I held my peace; but he soon brought me to bay again.

"You were not quite serious, I conclude, in what you said a minute ago about your niece," he began, "I am sure it is not in your nature to treat anybody shabbily; and I think you'll admit that the girl has a right to expect something from you; and, really, after the hopes I have thrown out to Cathcart, I should feel mighty small if I could report no better success than I have scored so far."

"I am not answerable, surely, for the hopes you have held out to Cathcart?" I remarked.

"Well, yes, I think you are," said Mr. Dodman. "There's an only niece, with a rich uncle; here's a rich uncle with an only niece. How the deuce was it to enter into the heart of man to conceive the rich uncle, who has done so much for fellows who are neither kith nor kin to him, would not hail with satisfaction the opportunity of endowing his only niece with some of his worldly goods?"

"It is a pity you did not communicate with me before settling my affairs with Cathcart," I answered. "However, that there may be no mistake about the matter for the future, it will be better for me to recapitulate what I have already stated. I will furnish a small house for them, plainly but substantially."

"If they take my advice, they'll go into lodgings."

"I will allow Bessie after her marriage the same amount I am paying you at present."

"Keep her in pins and needles, anyhow," again interpolated Mr. Dodman.

"And in the event of my death she will have, for her own life, with remainder to her children, the insurance I effected for her benefit many years since, as well as the income I propose to give her now."

"You'll think better of it, Mr. Cheverley."

"I shall not think better of the marriage, I know, Mr.

Dodman," I answered ; " and my mind is quite made up as regards the money part of the question."

Mr. Dodman looked at me and opened his mouth as if to speak. Then he closed it again, having decided, probably he would be wise to remain silent.

I said no more, and neither did he for a few moments, during the course of which he meditatively sipped strong brandy very little diluted. At last he took up his parable.

" Now, I'll make you an offer," were the opening words of his sentence ; " I'll make you an offer. Lump the whole thing—present income, insurance reversion—all together, and say what you will give down and be done with it. I won't fix a value ; that is a matter more in your line than mine. If we took the concern to the ' Home and Foreign,' what would they estimate the worth—stock, lock, and barrel ? You must have the figures at your finger-ends ; you can't have forgotten your average values in so short a time."

I had thought nothing Mr. Dodman might say could amaze me ; but I confess this proposition took me aback. From the first I had conjectured a sum down was what he and Cathcart wanted ; but such extremely plain speaking, more particularly following so closely as it did, on the delicate manœuvring of the earlier part of the interview, well-nigh took away my breath.

Had the " Rosy-posy " of the introductory chapter, " the greatest blessing " that ever crossed Mr. Dodman's poor threshold—the " lovely girl, happy as a grig, lively as a cricket, all life and animation," who was represented as having made a conquest of a gentleman " hand and glove with all the City nobs"—suddenly been transformed into a nuisance, to be got rid of, even at a considerable price, Mr. Dodman's manner and expression and speech could not have undergone a more complete change.

" Here's such a chance," he seemed to imply, " as may never cross your way again. Don't let it slip ! What will you give this honourable, handsome, straightforward, likely young fellow to take this Old Man of the Sea off your hands ? Look sharp, now ! We won't fall out over a hundred or two ; but you must make me a decent offer."

It would be idle to say my long experience of the City had not brought me, over and over again, into close and

unpleasant contact with individuals as like Mr. Dodman as, to quote one of his favourite similies, "peas in a pod;" but I had been divorced from old times and old ways now for a considerable period, and I felt my visitor's utterances rasp me as utterances had not done previously.

I knew perfectly well the whole thing was a "put-up" affair; that the two worthies, being so much in want of money, had bethought them that they might as well relieve me of the care of some of mine. I understood, if I held to my resolution, "Rosy-posy" would have to lose her lover, and forego all hopes of "driving in her carriage," unless that conveyance was provided by some other than Cathcart.

It was a gain, however, to have the matter put into a concrete form at last; not merely to guess what Mr. Dodman was aiming at, but to know his own desires from his own lips. I could answer him now with a candour exceeding his own.

"Thank you," I said, "for at last coming to the point. If Cathcart wants a sum down with Bessie, he will certainly not have it from me. I do not like the match. I feel satisfied Cathcart is not suited to Bessie, or Bessie to Cathcart; still, if they decide to marry, I will allow her the income I have mentioned, which should help them on their way materially. More I will not do. Nothing shall induce me to pay what you call a lump-sum down."

"Well, I'm——!" exclaimed Mr. Dodman.

It was not necessary for me to comment on this declaration; of course he might naturally be supposed to know whether the statement could be relied on as accurate or the reverse. Under any circumstances it was no business of mine; and so I remained silent, while he commenced firing off the following sentences, which he delivered with pauses between, in order to enable me to raise objections or proffer comfort if I felt so disposed.

"If anybody had sworn it to me I would not have believed it!"

"And a man who has known what it is to be under the thumb of a parcel of purse-proud snobs!"

"It just shows the bad affect coming into a fine fortune has on people accustomed to consider sixpences and farthings."

"I'll never be able to look that noble, generous young fellow in the face again."

"I came on a fool's errand, it seems, and I'll have to go back like a fool."

"——it, Mr. Cheverley!" he broke out suddenly, finding I took no notice of his remarks, "if you have not any consideration for yourself, you might have some for me. How should you like to be in my shoes, and forced to tell Cathcart, instead of being flattered by his offer—an offer an alderman, egad! might feel proud of for his daughter—you hum and haw and chaffer about the matter as if we were a couple of Jews trying to cheat each other over the price of an old saucepan?"

"I am not to blame," I answered, "for any disappointment you experience at not finding me as great a simpleton as you imagined. The proposal of which you speak in such high terms recommends itself to my mind in no solitary particular. I have known Cathcart for years, and the more I have known of your friend the less I have liked him."

"We are all aware, of course, that there was only one person in the office able to win golden opinions, literally golden, from Mr. Cheverley. If Mr. Cheverley was acquainted with many facts I could communicate concerning his *protégé*, he might not feel so much disposed to waste his substance on strangers, and leave his own flesh and blood out in the weather. A certain plausible sneak, called Holway, can get his cheques and his twenty-pound notes, and his outfit, and his passage money, and——"

"May I ask what all this has to do with my niece?" I interrupted.

"This, sir, that although you choose to desert her, I will not; that I will take care to proclaim her wrongs to the world; that when I hear you spoken of as a liberal and kindly creature, whom anybody can get round and soft-sawder, I will laugh and tell the tale of how he treated his only living relative, leaving her to the care of total strangers—less than kin, but more than kind;" and Mr. Dodman would have pledged his own statement in another glass of brandy, but that I interposed, and, removing the bottle, said, firmly,

"If you want any more to drink, Mr. Dodman, you must get it under some other roof than mine."

He looked at me fiercely for a moment ; then, clapping his hat on the crown with a force I expected would crush it in, strode unsteadily out of the room, turning at the door to remark,

"You have not done with me yet, sir ; you shall hear from me again."

Greatly exercised in my mind as to the course I ought to adopt with reference to Bessie, I was, over tea, the next evening, explaining how matters stood to Smith, when the door opened and my niece herself rushed in, and, throwing her arms round my neck, kissed me over and over again, exclaiming "O, my dear, dear uncle ! O, my cruel, hard-hearted uncle ! No, you're not—I do not know what you are—but I am the most wretched, miserable girl in all the world ;" and she laid her head on my shoulder, as if with the intention of crying out her sorrows there.

"Bessie," I said, "do you see I have a visitor ?"

It was astonishing the speed with which she recovered herself, and turned towards Mr. Smith, who would have retired from the scene, had I not entreated him to stop. An interview with Bessie alone, in her then frame of mind, would, I felt, be more than I could endure.

"Now, let me pour out tea, uncle," cried Bessie, wiping her eyes, in which there had been no tears, and turning, with that fatal alacrity I remembered so well, to the table. "It will be just like old times at the dear Snuggery ;" and taking off her bonnet and jacket, she seated herself in the chair I had vacated.

"I suppose we are all friends here," she began, after a minute's general conversation, "and that I may say what I came for. I stole out by myself, without telling any one where I was off to. I did not let even Maggie know. Uncle, you'll give in, won't you ? It will break my heart if Richard does not marry me."

"I have not put any obstacle in the way, Bessie," I answered. "He can marry you if he likes."

"But he can't marry me without some money," she replied.

"I offered to allow you what I consider a good help towards housekeeping," I explained.

"Yes, but that is of no use. It is very kind of you, I am sure, and I feel very grateful, and all that ; only what is

required is not less than a thousand pounds down. If they have that, he and Mr. Dodman can make at least fifteen hundred a year."

As my niece spoke I could not resist glancing at Smith, but he returned no answering look; he sat, with his eyes fastened on his teacup, deaf, dumb, and blind, apparently, to the play which was being performed at our end of the table.

"My dear Bessie," I said, "if Cathcart and Mr. Dodman told me they could make four times fifteen hundred a year I would not advance any money for the purpose."

"But why won't you?" she asked.

I declined to enter into the question of why and wherefore with her. I simply stated I had made up my mind upon the question, and told her it was useless to ask me to reconsider my decision.

Bessie then talked as I expected she would talk. Quite unrestrained by the presence of a stranger, she spoke rapturously of Cathcart—glorified his social position; alluded to the balls and parties they were to frequent together; alluded to the riches of his relations; winding up by remarking "she was sure as sure I never would be such an obstinate old darling as to refuse to make her the happiest girl in the whole of London."

In very plain English I told her I did not mean to pay a thousand pounds in cash down, even for that purpose, when she began to whimper, and delicately hinted "I might well give her the money now as afterwards, because, you know," she added, "I am the only near relation you have in the world."

I cannot exactly tell what reply I might have made to this speech, which showed the probable contents of what would have been fully discussed in conclave by the Dodman family, but for the fortunate intervention of Smith, who, rousing himself as if from a dream, said lazily,

"May I ask you one question, Miss Richards?"

"Yes; what is it?"

"Has it never occurred to you that your uncle might marry?"

Evidently it never had (anybody, that is to say, except Miss Dodman) for she at once answered, her eyes wide open with amazement,

"Uncle marry ! Why, he must be older even than—"

"I am," finished Mr. Smith, composedly. "I do not think he is much older, but that is a matter of no consequence. I daresay, now, you would not consider me the sort of man likely to attract a lady's fancy?"

"No, indeed I should not!" answered Bessie.

"We have got into the Palace of Truth at last," laughed Smith, turning to me. "I also should say not, Miss Bessie," he went on, turning to my niece; "and yet there is a lady possessed of some money, who has conceived for me as strong an affection as Titania did for Bottom. I am mentioning the fact less from any desire to boast," finished my whimsical friend, "than to prove there is no age or condition of man in which he need despair of finding some fair creature willing to take compassion on his loneliness."

Bessie sat turning her teaspoon over and over.

"She has got a nut to crack now," thought Smith, looking at her.

"But if uncle marries," asked Bessie, suddenly, "what is to become of me? You surely don't mean to desert me altogether!" she added, clasping her hands and turning a face, now really bedewed with tears, to where I sat, considering marriage was not for me, but wisely refraining from saying so.

"No, Bessie," I assured her, "I shall never desert you;" and then followed a silence, which was broken by Mr. Smith, who, saying he must go, rose, and would have shaken hands with me in the room but that I insisted on accompanying him to the door.

"You stick to that," he advised in the hall. "I have put a court-card in your hand;" after which remark he went.

Bessie did not stay long after him. She was very tearful and very miserable, and apparently very little inclined to stir; but she said she must go, or the Dodmans would wonder what in the world had become of her. Ere she took her departure I presented Cathcart's *fiancée* with a couple of sovereigns, but even this golden ointment failed to mollify the wound Smith's words had inflicted.

There was very little of it, to be sure, and the wound was both deep and long—so deep and so long, she left me quite down-hearted.

Her expectations of fortune had crashed in as suddenly and completely as a good many of Mr. Dodman's speculations.

Bessie had not left me half an hour, and I was just about to put on my coat and hat and turn out for a stroll under the gas-lamps, when another visitor arrived in the person of Cathcart.

"How do you do, Mr. Cheverley?" he began. "I thought I had better just come up and talk matters over with you myself."

I asked him to be seated, and then the whole affair was gone through again. He said he was afraid "that ass Dodman" had offended me. "He took it upon himself to call upon you," explained Cathcart. "I should never have suggested his doing so."

The additions which that interview made to my former stock of knowledge were—first, that Cathcart was likely to leave the "Home and Foreign," "which is not now a place fit for a dog, to say nothing of a gentleman," he explained; and second, that the idea had been for Bessie and himself to reside with me.

It was quite wonderful to consider the manner in which these good people had planned and contrived my future for me. I feel no doubt in anticipation they had already discussed the disease most likely to carry me off, settled the details of my will, and decided on a funeral as plain as possible, because he "was always of a retiring disposition, poor fellow."

Smith drafted out this last idea for me; and really as he spoke I could, in imagination, see Cathcart and Dodman whirling merrily back in the mourning coach after leaving me, poor cumberer of the ground, safely packed away for ever.

Cathcart, in his interview with me, however, was quiet and sensible enough. He said he was very fond of Bessie, and that he wished to marry soon. He could not do this, though, he added, without help from some one.

"If I leave the old shop," he said, "and, candidly, I don't think I can stand the life much longer—I want to go *into business* on my own account, and to do so I shall *require capital*."

"But your own friends—" I suggested.

"Will help me when once they think I have no need of them," he answered. "It is wonderful to consider the amount of assistance a man can get when he does not want it ;" a truism so obvious I felt it unnecessary to make any comment.

He did not say a word about Mr. Dodman going into business with him, and neither did I.

Concerning Bessie's visit, I also refrained my lips. She had earnestly asked me to keep it secret "from them all." I quote her own expression, and even if she had not asked me I should have said nothing about it.

Thus I was master of the position. Each of the three had presented me with a strand of the rope, unknowing that I held the other two. From the first I guessed how matters stood ; when Cathcart had finished his statement, I knew.

He and Dodman were at their wits' ends. Somehow or other they had got into a deeper rut than usual, and I was the Jupiter they hoped could be induced to come and extricate them from their difficulties.

"*Pas si bête*, however," said Smith, subsequently ; which expression I really do not consider in the slightest degree more elegant than its English equivalent.

"No," I told Cathcart when he had finished his plausible statement, "I do not feel disposed to give my niece anything except an annual income."

He thought this over for a minute, and then said,

"You would put the allowance on some tangible footing, I suppose ?"

"O, certainly," I agreed ; "I would place the matter beyond the power of my own caprice"—he smiled in deprecation of the word—"and so arrange that Bessie should have no power to forestall her income, to assign it in any way," I added.

Cathcart tried hard to prevent his face telling tales as he listened to my last words, but it would not do ; and, though he left me with the understanding that I might expect him to bring Bessie to see me shortly, I knew the whole affair was virtually at an end, and that already the "noble young fellow," the "pet of the Mansion House," was considering what he had better do next.

About a week later, one day, when I had returned to

my lodgings after a most disagreeable walk through the City, where I had to repair on business,, I found a cab at the door laden with boxes, and Bessie in the parlour, which room looked already as if the brokers had been in possession there, instead of their being, as it appeared now, at Mr. Dodman's.

"We had to get my things out the back way," she explained. "Mr. Dodman said it was better for me to leave at once, as they had nothing to eat themselves, and soon would not have even a roof over their heads. He had been drinking, and swore dreadfully," added Bessie, who was very fond of entering into details. "So I am back on your hands, uncle," she finished. "I shall be quite happy here."

"It is impossible you can stay with me, Bessie," I said, firmly. "I must go at once and see what arrangements I can make for the time being."

"Send her to Holway's," advised Smith, to whom I repaired in this dilemma; "she'll be in her element there."

I knew what he meant. As one may trace the course of a storm by the damage it has wrought, so every path trodden by Bessie and Mrs. Holway was strewn with the wrecks of confusion and disorder. There chanced to be this difference between the pair, however: Mrs. Holway thought of herself last, if she ever thought of herself at all; my niece's first and last and only thought was of Bessie Richards.

CHAPTER XXX.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

MID-WINTER in the Thames Valley—the middle of a winter when the snow had fallen heavily, and the water was "coming down from Oxford;" when the floods were out, and no one unacquainted with the "lie of the country" could have told which was dry land in summer and which the river. That was the season to see the favoured valley in perfection. Water, water, nothing but water, everywhere—the meadows covered by it; the trees growing in it; the

hedges struggling to keep their heads above it. A great sea of sullen, waveless, rushing, moaning, gurgling water; an ever-increasing tide, unable to find the outlet it was seeking, and compelled to spread itself out over the haunts and habitations of men. It creeps under the doors of barns, and sobs its mysterious way across the fields and garden-paths, and up the steps to the highest terrace, where it washes and gurgles against the French casements, and so at last persistently laps an entrance into the very house. A terrible visitor in its strength, its silence, its swiftness, and its subtlety!

When the Thames is four miles wide at Chertsey it is something to look out on that waste of waters, and listen to the lonely sighing of the spreading flood, which is like unto no other sound that ever falls on the ear of man.

A steady flow, without an ebb; innumerable currents setting in the direction of gardens and orchards, of level mead and by-lane and broad high-road; a lake of muddy water, the monotony of which is broken at intervals by a dash of white froth marking where the flood has chafed itself into fury over the obstruction of a stone or the stump of a tree. Choose a gloomy winter's afternoon, with a pallid sun going down amid stormy clouds behind the Egham hills, the blackness of night travelling fast from the east, casting darksome shadows before it—no man or woman, no dog, or horse, or animal of any description, to bestow one touch of life on the desolate landscape—and the spectator sees before him a scene he will remember when he has forgotten many a fair outlook, many a bright laughing view.

As is usually the case, the "oldest inhabitant"—a term, to quote Mr. Smith, which is in general synonymous with the "greatest liar in the parish"—said the Thames had not been so high for twenty years; nay, he went on still further, and asserted the water was nigh on a foot deeper on Runnymede than since the time of King John. Those who resided in the Thames Valley, and were able to go away, left that favoured region in possession of the waters; while those who had houses in London piously thanked Heaven they were not as those sinners down the South Western rail, who never knew, when they went to bed at night, whether they might not have to take, in a sketchy toilet, to the nearest punt before morning.

All this excitement and notoriety was, it is perhaps scarcely necessary to say, delightful to Mr. Rodewald. Had his cottage been perched on the top of Primrose Hill, he would have declared a palace rent-free should not induce him to take up permanent quarters in Surrey; but, having rented The Snuggery, he was never weary of expatiating to those with whom he came in contact of the delights of living in a well-watered country.

"There is nothing like it," he said, enthusiastically. "I wouldn't have missed seeing those volumes of water pouring over the meads for any money that could be offered to me."

"Each one to his taste," commented Mr. Smith, when this observation was made to him; and then nothing would content Mr. Rodewald but that his friend should repair into the Valley, to be converted.

"You'll never see anything like it again," he remarked, labouring evidently under the delusion that the whole thing had been a scenic effect got up by Providence out of personal regard for himself. "It's a chance you ought not to miss. Please yourself, of course; but, as a writer, it seems to me this is an opportunity you would be very foolish to let slip. I can't offer you society, because everybody has fled except De Field, and, as you know, he's a fellow I find it impossible to fraternise with. Frankford is away, and Posinby—all of them; but though it is impossible for me to take you visiting, I can show you millions of tons of water. From my cottage to Thamesford Ferry is one wide lake, and Milter's meadows are all submerged, while the Reed is out a mile, I should say, on the other side; it meets the Thames, at any rate, in Hampsfield Meads. Do come, like a reasonable being, if it is only from Saturday till Monday."

Thus exhorted, Mr. Smith said he would run down some afternoon and have a look at the Thames Valley under water.

"You were not so enthusiastic about the matter last winter, if I recollect rightly," he added.

"O, it was nothing last winter there. The rivers only rose sufficiently to make everything sloppy and dirty. We were not living in the midst of a flood, only of a swamp. It is quite exciting, I assure you. Why, from my window, I

can see a lake of, I suppose, twenty square miles in size. The inhabitants are going about the streets of Hampsfield on planks laid on the top of casks. I went over there last Monday, and found a regular torrent pouring across the market-place."

"Well, I'll come down," repeated Mr. Smith; "but remember, Rodewald, you are not, upon any pretext whatsoever, to ask me to go visiting. If you do, I shall refuse; and then we are likely to quarrel, and I do not want to quarrel with you if I can help it."

"Make your mind easy on that point," said Mr. Rodewald. "In the first place there is no one to visit; and in the next, if there were, I should certainly not urge you to do anything likely to prove disagreeable. I have not forgotten the fright you gave me that night at View Water. No, never again, I decided, will I try to get Smith out of his shell. Each man understands his own idiosyncrasies best. I could not have believed it possible for a quiet dinner to upset a person so completely. The fact is, I suppose, that if you ever went into society at all, you have for so long a time held aloof from it, the excitement, slight though it may seem to others, proves too much for you."

There was a something in Mr. Rodewald's manner as he delivered himself of this utterance which, airy and intangible as it was, arrested Mr. Smith's attention; but he only said,

"If one's lot in life is to go round and round in a mill, do you not think it is true wisdom to believe such a lot the best and most acceptable that could be offered?"

"Well, perhaps for you," agreed Mr. Rodewald, with lordly condescension.

"O, I did not mean for you, believe me," answered Mr. Smith, laughing. "We are two very different people."

"Yes, that is true," said Mr. Rodewald, in the tone of one who felt that Nature never had cut out such a perfect pattern as himself, and never could repeat the feat. "For years, I admit candidly, I have, from various causes, been compelled to live out of the world. So far our cases are parallel; but never believing that the necessity for such seclusion would always continue, I have refrained from *finally slamming* the door between myself and society."

Now, that is what you have done—that is where we differ. You have shut yourself up in your little den and turned the key against your fellows."

"And—" suggested Mr. Smith.

"I do not know I have anything else to add, except that I shall not attempt to drag you out of your tub. If society is disagreeable to you, why, it is, and we can't alter the fact."

"It is a comfort to find you so tolerant."

"Tolerant! There never existed so tolerant a man as myself. Had I not been, our friendship could not have lasted as it has."

"Anyhow, it is quite understood I am not to be inveigled out to any entertainment."

"No. You shall do precisely as it seemeth best to thee. Now, when and where are we to meet on Saturday?"

"Nowhere in town," answered Mr. Smith, decidedly. "I shall turn up at The Snuggery some time during the course of the evening; but I won't bind myself to an hour. I cannot tell how I may be situated."

"To hear you talk, any one might conclude you had the affairs of the nation on your shoulders."

"I have my own, and I find them quite sufficient." After which retort, Mr. Smith lounged out of Mr. Rodewald's office, where he had called to pay some money.

He did not put in an appearance at The Snuggery till nine o'clock on the Saturday arranged for his visit. With what Mr. Rodewald called "his usual indifference to the wishes and feelings of other persons," he had taken train for Thamesford, and made his way back to Reedbourne as best he could.

He found it necessary, as he stated, to "dodge the floods," and was therefore obliged to work a circuitous route, so as to avoid places where the water covered the high-road for a few hundred yards, and to find by-lanes likely not to lead him too far from the point he desired to touch.

By great good fortune, he said, he had accidentally been able to see the aspect presented by the river from Thamesford Bridge, under the light of a young but bright moon.

"It was a wonderful scene," he remarked; "weird and desolate and impressive beyond anything I could have conceived."

"You may consider yourself fortunate to have escaped drowning," observed Mr. Rodewald. "I do not think there is another human being, except yourself, who would have started on such a mad expedition as to walk after nightfall from Thamesford to Reedbourne with the water out."

"But I am not drowned, as you see. Where are the children, and how is Miss Lydney?"

Somewhat shortly, Mr. Rodewald said the children had gone to bed, and his sister-in-law was well. Having proposed to act the part of showman to the Thames Valley, with the water higher than it had been since the time of King John, and not a square inch of Runnymede dry land, he felt naturally incensed at Mr. Smith's coolness in taking the matter into his own hands. He did not think it nice or friendly of Smith to go and see such a spectacle by himself, and he was a little sulky for a time in consequence.

But during supper he unbent. After all, it was pleasant to sit opposite the old familiar face, and hear the remembered tones that had given strength and support to his soul so often—to have an intelligent being to talk to, as a relief from the prattle of his girls, or the household gossip, above which poor Miss Lydney seemed unable to rise.

Yes, with all his faults—and in Mr. Rodewald's opinion he had many—Mr. Smith was good company. He possessed a bitter tongue, and he never looked at anything from a usual and common-sense point of view; but still he is "something," thought Mr. Rodewald, "for a man like myself to whet my intellect on."

When supper was over, and Miss Lydney, remarking it was Saturday and she felt tired, bade Mr. Smith good-night, the last shade of dissatisfaction vanished from Mr. Rodewald's face as he said, after he put a fresh billet on the fire, and begged his friend to fill his pipe,

"It is quite like old times to have you here again. What an age it seems since you were down before!"

"Yes," agreed Mr. Smith, pressing the tobacco into his pipe as he spoke.

"You seem to have found some profitable employment."

"I have worked very hard."

"Yes. You are not looking well."

"I am not well."

"Why do you overdo it? You know I would assist you, as regards money matters, in any possible way. I have always tried to stand your friend. It vexes me to see you, after a fashion, killing yourself in order to meet your engagements."

For a minute Mr. Smith did not reply; his whole attention seemed to be devoted to getting his pipe to light; then he said,

"There comes a night when no man can work. Even in a worldly and pecuniary sense, those words are true; and if I were to rest on my oars now, there might come a time when I should be unable to pull to land."

"Why don't you insure your life, and then you might take things a little more easily?"

"My life is insured."

"Why did you never say so before?"

"Why should I say so now? I did not insure it for your benefit."

"Surely there was nothing in my question to induce so sharp an answer?"

"I did not mean to be sharp. Overwork, and perhaps other matters, have made me irritable lately. Let us change the topic. John Smith is one of those subjects of which I find it impossible to hear too much. Tell me something concerning Reedbourne; there is a good, soothing sleepy sound about the very name of the place, which seems grateful to my nerves."

Mr. Rodewald, filling his own pipe, nodded his head, gravely. He was thinking,

"This is the pass to which laudanum brings a man. How thankful I am I never, in any trouble of my life, took to stimulants or sedatives!" but he said aloud: "There is not much to tell; we go on much as formerly. Field is rather more bumptious than he used to be; but I rather fancy there'll be a smash-up at Reed House ere long. He was bitten deeply, I know, over the company Sonnington floated. Fifty thousand, I fancy, won't see him out of it. He has three lawsuits pending now, and he only defends them to gain time. Well, I sha'n't lament when his nose is brought to the grindstone; and I sha'n't be sorry for the Reedbourne tradespeople he lets in. I gave some of them fair warning what they might expect, and if they like to

risk their goods after what I said, the fault is not mine."

"Did you think the Reedbournians incapable, then, of taking care of themselves?" asked Mr. Smith, in mild astonishment.

"They live out of the world," explained Mr. Rodewald, blandly tolerant of the ignorance to which he felt himself superior. "I might lose a million of money, and, unless I failed to pay them for the last half-pound of sugar, they would never know anything about the matter. They hear nothing, they read nothing, they know nothing. Except the local news reported in the *Hampsfeld Gazette*, they have not an idea of what is going on beyond the Reed. London might be in Africa, and our places of business in New Zealand, for all they care or can tell about us."

"Go on," entreated Mr. Smith, lazily. "Your mental activity is quite refreshing. I always thought nothing was too small or too great for you. So you really have taken the interests of the country greengrocer and milkman under your fatherly care?"

"I could not look on and see men running the chance of losing their little all without speaking a word of caution," answered Mr. Rodewald, "more especially as they seemed to look up to me, and inclined to place implicit faith in my guidance. So when the grocer mentioned Field owed him a couple of hundred pounds, and added he did not like to ask for the money lest he should lose the custom, but that the want of it was really inconveniencing him, I advised him to press for the whole at once."

"'You'll do as you like, of course,' I said; 'but if you find afterwards you get nothing, remember I warned you in time; it is better to cry over your goods than after them.'"

"Well, and did he take your advice?"

"Yes; and is now, I am sorry to say, going up and down the parish cursing me for having given, and himself for having followed, it; but I don't mind. I only did my duty. I acted by him as I should have felt obliged had any one acted by me; and if he chooses to be ungrateful, that is only what one might expect."

Mr. Smith laughed.

"This is all delightfully interesting, Rodewald," he remarked. "Pray proceed."

"It would seem," explained Mr. Rodewald, "that, after waiting and hesitating for several days whether he would or would not ask for his account, he heard Field had sold his pair of carriage-horses, and was going to drive only one in the brougham during the winter. Now, there were reasons for this, quite independent of any motives of economy, as the idiot must have seen, had he only stopped for a moment to consider. He had thought little of what I told him; but selling one horse seemed to his wisdom bankruptcy made visible. Without more to do he started off for Reed House, stopping at the Reedbourne Arms to fortify himself for the visit, and was so insolent, Field wrote out an open cheque for the amount of his account, and told him never to set foot inside the gate again. Next day he went up to town, secured his money, and the reaction began. When he saw the cart of his Hampsfield rival delivering goods at Reed House, he took to his bed; and since he got up has been, figuratively speaking, on his knees before Field."

"How fond Field must be of you!" observed Mr. Smith.

"There's no love lost between us," agreed Mr. Rodewald. "Some day, perhaps, he may wish he had been ordinarily civil to me."

"If he had, I suppose you would have left the Reedbourne tradesmen to look after their own interests?" said Mr. Smith.

But Mr. Rodewald discreetly ignored this suggestion.

"And Posinby, how is he getting on?" asked Mr. Smith, after having paused in vain for a reply. "And the fair Wickenden? O, tell me about her!"

"When I saw her last," said Mr. Rodewald, "she was much as usual. She inquired particularly after you, as she always does—for that matter, indeed, so did they all."

"How many persons are included in that 'all'?" inquired Mr. Smith. "Excuse me if I seem inquisitive; but it would be agreeable to know the names of those kind enough to remember the fact of my existence."

"Well, there are only three of them in that household you know—excluding servants, of course—I meant Mr. and Mrs. Posinby and Miss Wickenden."

"Most thoughtful, I am sure. And is Mr. Posinby still going the same pace?"

"The same pace, only faster."

"It must be break-neck by this time, then."

"Yes; he has got himself into a nice mess."

"And can't you, with your business knowledge, and fondness for putting your fingers into other folks' pies, help him out of it?"

"Really, Smith, if I didn't know you as well as I do—"

"Never mind that now. Can't you help him?" and Mr. Smith looked curiously at Mr. Rodewald through the smoke they both were making.

"No. I *may* be able to help her, though I almost doubt it."

"I thought her money was tied up, so that she couldn't muddle it away if she tried."

"H—m! I don't know so much about that."

"Have they taken you into council?"

"I think it has proved a comfort both to husband and wife to talk to me. I see plenty of trouble ahead for both of them; but I really do not exactly know how it is possible for me to interfere in their affairs with advantage."

"To you or to them?" asked Mr. Smith.

"I don't want to reap any advantage, I assure you. They have been kind and nice to me; and if *she* was not his wife, and *he* was not her husband, it might be possible to make some suggestions; but she is so entirely under his dominion, and he is such a wild harum-scarum sort of fellow, that sometimes I feel driven to my wit's end. The mad wasteful folly of that house is almost incredible. What do you say to the servants drinking up the champagne because there was no beer?"

"They showed an amount of practical sense worthy of all praise," criticised Mr. Smith. "But how on earth, Rodewald, did you get to know of this proceeding?"

"Mrs. Posinby sent for me."

"The deuce she did!"

There was such a world of meaning in Mr. Smith's words, and such an amazed expression in his face, that Mr. Rodewald tried hard to look at him straight, but failed, and went on hurriedly,

"The brewers had struck over their account, and refused to supply another barrel till they received some money."

Mrs. Posinby had no money ; and as beer was therefore not forthcoming, the butler coolly fell back on the champagne."

"Yes. And Mrs. Posinby?"

"Poor soul! she sent for me in the greatest distress."

"What did she want you to do?"

"Clear the house."

"And when you had swept and garnished it?"

"I advised her to go away for a short time. Her health seemed seriously affected."

"How did Posinby take that?"

"He professed himself very grateful; said View Water was a tremendous expense, and that he shouldn't care if the floods rose a little more and carried it off bodily into the Thames."

"From the appearance of the country, more unlikely things have happened."

"That won't happen. No miracle will intervene to save friend Posinby from the consequences of his own acts."

"What do you mean—what wickedness has the man been up to?"

"He has done that which will transport him some day," said Mr. Rodewald, in a calm even voice, as though he had been merely remarking that Mr. Posinby might, twenty years after, expect to gather walnuts from a tree just planted.

"Did he tell you this?" asked Mr. Smith, taking the pipe out of his mouth, stretching his legs till his feet touched the fender, and looking at Mr. Rodewald with a sort of fascinated astonishment.

"Not in so many words; but I found it out."

"O, you found it out? What did you find?"

"I don't mind telling you, for I know the matter will go no further; but he has been dealing with the property."

"How could he do that?"

"I have not cared to go deeply into the affair; but somehow he has got money on View Water."

"Is that why he wishes the Thames would carry the place down to Sheerness?"

"I suppose so; though that would not help him much, unless Somerset House went after it."

"Poor devil!" exclaimed Mr. Smith, whose moral sense was, as Mr. Rodewald often told him, "singularly defective."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"HEAR, HEAR!"

It was a miserable morning—it might, to judge from appearance, have been Black Monday, with all the impending cares of the week hanging heavy on its mind, instead of Sunday, with banks closed, and duns keeping quiet within their own houses, and debtors trying to catch their breath, and a great silence pervading Reedbourne, where there was nothing in the world to do except go to hear Mr. Rivers discoursing on the Prophets, or walk over to Hampsfield and listen to the clergyman there trying to prove that two and two made five, and enlivening his discourse at intervals with the remark, which he really put almost in the form of a conundrum,

"What says St. Paul?"

A dull, damp, depressing, heavy morning—warm, oppressive, relaxing, and unhealthy.

When Mr. Smith opened his window, and stood, with arms resting on the sash, surveying the landscape as it looked under a leaden sky, with a drizzling rain falling on the damp earth, he perceived a steam rising in the favoured valley, which immediately suggested to his mind the idea of fever and ague made visible. Beyond this mist lay water—miles of it—trees and hedges growing in its midst; altogether a dull and sombre scene, that struck the same sad key the man's own thoughts were pitched in.

The tints of the landscape were no grayer than those which had pervaded the dreary story of his life.

"Not cheerful, certainly," he decided. "Now, I wonder if this might be considered a tempting morning for a man to commit suicide?"

He could not settle this matter to his mind, and, turning from the window, determined to refer it to Mr. Rodewald.

But Mr. Rodewald was not, he found, in a mood to receive any suggestion of the sort in a proper spirit. During breakfast that gentleman was very captious indeed. Evidently something had gone wrong domestically; and Mr.

Smith swallowed his coffee and buttered his toast and tapped his egg in a wise silence, wondering what in the world could have happened, for during the whole of his long acquaintance with the household he had never before seen Miss Lydney "short" with her brother-in-law, or heard Mr. Rodewald snappish in his remarks to the lady who presided over his establishment. The girls, too, were singularly quiet and undemonstrative. When the uncomfortable meal was over, Mr. Rodewald left the room in order to put on thick boots, advising Mr. Smith to follow his example, as the roads were in such a "vile state." Miss Lydney, with Annie close at her heels, departed to the kitchen; while Susan only paused for a moment to whisper to her stanch friend,

"Isn't papa cross?" ere limping after her aunt and sister.

Mr. Smith, left thus alone, stood for a moment in the middle of the room amazed. "What's up?" he thought; and then, turning to the window, he once again commenced contemplating the aspect of external Nature, as Nature can look almost at her worst.

"Aren't you ready?" asked his host, breaking across his reverie.

Mr. Rodewald spoke in an aggrieved tone. His state of mind was that popularly known as being ready to quarrel with his own five fingers.

"Yes, quite ready," answered Mr. Smith, with a calm gloom, which served its purpose as well as any other mood might have done.

"Won't you put on a top-coat?"

"Too warm," was the laconic reply.

"Well, then, come along," and thus exhorted, Mr. Smith preceded his host across the hall.

Mr. Rodewald shut the door behind them with a hearty bang, and they walked down the short drive, their feet sinking into the wet gravel, and leaving deep impressions as they passed along.

Once out in the road Mr. Rodewald found a great deal to say, and he said it. He began with a general statement to the effect that it was a pity people would not be reasonable; he affirmed that the want of common sense—ordinary sense—was the cause of pretty nearly all the trouble and misunderstanding in the world. He proceeded

further to observe that, as a rule, he thought women were much more deficient in this desirable quality than men. He said their education was so imperfect—that their reasoning powers were so poorly developed—that they were so prejudiced and so hard to get out of a certain groove—the result could not perhaps be wondered at, though it was impossible to lament it sufficiently.

So far he had the talk to himself; Mr. Smith remained silent. He suspected what this all meant, but he was waiting to hear.

One of Mr. Rodewald's greatest needs in existence was a confidant. He would rather have told his grievances to an idiot than remained silent; but as even to idiots it is not always safe to expose the secrets of one's soul, he found he had usually either to content himself with generalities, or hold his tongue.

Perhaps this was one reason why Mr. Rodewald's generalities, being mostly barbed with some strong personal feeling, were so extremely disagreeable; when he condescended to particulars, the sting of his utterances lost half its venom.

To Mr. Smith he felt he could unbosom himself; and before they reached the church he explained that Miss Lydney was giving him a vast amount of annoyance.

"She is acting from the very best intentions, I am sure," he said, though indeed he felt sure of nothing of the sort; but I cannot make her understand that she is placing me in the falsest position possible. As I ask her, because I may be unable to buy a new hat at one period of my life, is it absolutely necessary I should go on wearing an old hat for ever? You see, Smith, don't you?"

"Yes, I think so," answered Mr. Smith; and he looked mournfully to right and left over the sodden fields and the swollen streamlets.

"It is really very hard upon *me*," continued Mr. Rodewald, eagerly. "I want to do the best I can for those connected with me. I am sure I try all in my power to make every one in the world as happy as possible. Even in business I know I often go out of my way to do a good turn to those who are not perhaps overgrateful for my kindness. I do not mean you, of course, Smith."

"O no, of course not ; I quite understand that," agreed Mr. Smith, grimly.

"And I feel it too bad, therefore, to have my motives misunderstood in the home circle, and wrong constructions put upon my simplest actions. After a great deal of trouble—an amount of trouble I should not have taken about any question, except a religious one—I managed to secure a pew in church. I got it as the greatest favour ; in fact, Frankford got it for me. I see you look surprised ; but the fact is I don't know my information about him was quite reliable ; and in any case I suppose a man, no matter how far he has gone wrong, may repent, eh ? What do you think ?"

"I should be very sorry to think he might not, though I believe he very seldom does," was the answer.

"Well, we may let that pass, at any rate. He knew I wanted a pew in Reedbourne Church, and, being hand and glove with Rivers, got me a nice snug little nook—holds four ; rather a tight fit, but still—"

"Yes ?" Mr. Smith uttered the word interrogatively.

"Of course, having the seat, I want my family to attend ; and do you think I can get Miss Lydney out in the forenoon ? No ; wild horses won't drag her."

"But Miss Lydney always preferred going to evening service."

"Precisely so ; and that is what I now desire to alter. Fact is, Smith—for I really do not think I ought to have any reserves with you—I find that our domestic arrangements are an anomaly in a place like Reedbourne. Of course in town it did not matter ; there people knew nothing about our business."

"I daresay plenty of people did," amended Mr. Smith ; "only you did not care then whether they did or not, and you *do* care now."

"You see, the position has altered," said Mr. Rodewald, in semi-apologetic explanation.

"It has," agreed Mr. Smith, "as I prophesied it would. You are getting on, my friend ; very shortly you will find yourself at the top of the tree."

"And don't you think it is very hard," asked Mr. Rodewald, in a tone in which gratification and annoyance were about evenly balanced, "that, knowing all the difficulties I have

had to overcome, and the way I have slaved to provide for my family and place them in a good station, any one should, now I am, as you so truly observe, getting up a little, try with might and main to pull me back?"

Mr. Smith opened his mouth to speak, but he thought better of it, and remained silent; while Mr. Rodewald, taking this silence for acquiescence, proceeded solemnly,

"And I can assure you, Smith, that the fact of my sister-in-law insisting on performing so many household duties with her own hands is, with some persons, a complete bar to social intercourse."

"I daresay it is," answered Mr. Smith, at the same moment taking off his hat, with a feeling of devout thankfulness, as they entered the church-porch.

Gloom is a totally inadequate word with which to endeavour to describe the interior of the sacred edifice, as it appeared to Mr. Smith on that special Sunday. It seemed to him as if all the mists and fogs and vapours in the whole Valley of the Thames had crept up the rising ground, and taken possession of the building. The painted windows loomed through a steam which would not have disgraced a washing-day. The figures of the clergyman and the choristers—for the state of the domestic atmosphere had caused Mr. Rodewald to be somewhat late in starting from The Snuggery, and service had already commenced—looked an immense way off and as if seen through a transparency. There were not many persons seated on the narrow and uncomfortable benches, called by courtesy pews. Most of the parishioners seemed to have preferred the comfort of their own firesides to the doubtful warmth of the heating apparatus in Reedbourne Church—an apparatus that could never really be relied on. Those who were present, however, gave cheerful assurance, by a running fire of stifled coughs, of what might be expected later on when the sermon began.

Altogether Reedbourne was at its worst that morning; and Mr. Rodewald seemed to feel this, for the whisper in which he said, "Do move on, Smith!" was not remarkable for geniality.

Mr. Smith, as usual, had been looking at the windows—those terrible windows—which for him possessed such a weird attraction; but, thus exhorted, he proceeded up the

side aisle till he was close beside the pulpit, where, with a just though chastened pride, Mr. Rodewald motioned him into a little pew at right angles with the high-art erection whence Messrs. Rivers and Grey were alternately in the habit of exhorting the Reedbourne sheep not to stray from the beaten track, but continue to pin their faith on perfectly unimportant points of detail, and prove their sincerity by subscribing, with their wonted liberality, to, &c.

In this pew, which Mr. Rodewald had moved heaven and earth to obtain, his friend felt more truly uncomfortable than he had ever before done in any church. He had not room for his legs; he could not sit sideways, because the seat was so narrow, and the floor encumbered with hassocks; he could not find any place to put his hat; and when he accidentally knocked over his companion's umbrella, Mr. Rodewald looked as much put out as though he had brought down the whole of "our lovely peal of bells."

"A parish coffin," said the unhappy man, subsequently, "would be easy and pleasant, Rodewald, in comparison to that egg-chest of yours in church. It may be all very well," he added, seeing his host was in no temper to hear reflections disparaging to anything he possessed, "for so admirably proportioned a fellow as you are to be packed into it; but to me, I can simply say it proved a cunningly-devised system of torture."

Time had been when such a tribute to his stiff sturdy figure, every line of which Mr. Rodewald thought perfection, would have restored his equanimity, and brought a glow of honest pleasure to his manly cheek; but on that especially gloomy Sunday it was so difficult to please him as to render the feat practically impossible.

"If things begin to go wrong in the morning they continue to go wrong," he threw out as a piece of general information, which Mr. Smith and Miss Lydney might find applicable personally, if they chose take the hint implied. Mr. Rodewald's morning had begun badly, and during the course of divine service he felt, to quote his own words, "put out consumedly."

For in church a thing happened which he would not, so he said, have chosen to occur—no, not for five hundred pounds.

"I do not see how it can possibly affect you in the least," said Mr. Smith, on their way home.

"Well, of course, no one who knows *me*," answered Mr. Rodewald, "could for a monent entertain the idea that I—But still—" and he shook his head gravely and sadly, and looked around on the submerged meadows, as if to suggest that, matters having now gone so far wrong with Frantz Rodewald, it would not much signify if a second Deluge did come upon the earth.

Up to a certain point public worship had that morning droned along in Reedbourne Church without any event happening to vary its monotony or startle its decorum. The curate had a cold, it is true; and the choristers, one and all, seemed to have got mist on the chest; the organ appeared actually to wheeze, and the clack of the bellows at times became terribly distinct; while the congregation could boast a collection of lung and bronchial affections which distanced all competitors. Cough, cough, cough,—hack, hack, hack; varied at intervals with paroxysms, brought on, no doubt, by attempts to stifle sounds which would have their way.

In the middle of the Thanksgiving, Mr. Grey paused dead, to let a perfect storm of coughs sweep by; then, before he gave out the hymn, he was good enough to tell his flock that their efforts to control the uncomfortable tickling in their throats, from which many of them seemed to suffer, were really productive of more alarming results than if they let Nature have her own way.

"It is trying, no doubt," he confessed; "but we must all strive to be as patient as we can;" having finished which kindly sentence, for some reason, known best to himself, the curate fixed Mr. Smith—who had not coughed, or thought of coughing, and who wore the expression an early Christian saint might have done on his way to torture and death—with a glance that seemed to say,

"I have my eye upon you."

Meeting this glance, Mr. Smith, without a change of countenance, shifted his position, uncrossed his long right leg from his left, and crossed his long left leg over his right.

He had no thought of defiance in the movement, but some who were able to follow Mr. Grey's gaze construed the action into a sort of insolent defiance.

The service proceeded. The Commandments, as read

by Mr. Rivers, were almost inaudible ; but that was a usual thing, and did not excite any feeling of surprise. In the Decalogue there was so much of the choir and so little of the Rector that it did not seem greatly to signify how many or how few of the words uttered by the clergyman found their way out of the chancel into the body of the church. Another hymn preluded the sermon ; and when it was finished, and the congregation again settled in their seats, a dead and unnatural silence succeeded to the previous tempest of unpleasant rasping sounds.

The church-going portion of Reedbourne was waiting for the text ere beginning again. If it remained quiet much longer it would get red in the face, and thick in the neck, and—

“It must be obvious to all present,” thus Mr. Rivers, in a thin husky voice, which had the effect of being uttered in a forced whisper somewhere in the region of his boots, “that it is as painful for me to speak as for you to listen. I am suffering from so severe a cold, and the effort for me to utter even these few words is so great, that I feel my best course is to postpone the address I had meant to give you to-day on the subject of the ten talents, and ask you to come when I am better, and let me tell you my views concerning the responsibilities of those to whom so much has been given.”

Just for a second there ensued an amazed silence—a silence of such utter astonishment that it was not broken by the sound of a solitary throat being cleared ; then a dreadful, a most terrible thing happened. Through the stillness came a perfectly audible, though softly murmured,

“Hear, hear !” an approving, an unctuous, an ironical, a practical “Hear, hear !” and it seemed to proceed from Mr. Rodewald’s pew, which was under the Rector’s very nose.

Each man in the church looked at his neighbour—each man, that is to say, except Mr. Smith. If he had been stone deaf he could not have remained more serenely unconscious ; if he had been blind from his birth he could not have seemed less mindful of the glare with which Mr. Rodewald regarded him.

Mr. Rivers was the first to regain self-possession, for it could not be said that Mr. Smith ever lost his.

With a grand courage, though somewhat tremulously, he pronounced the Blessing; then the congregation sank on its knees, the coughing recommenced, the ladies tittered, their faces covered with cobwebby handkerchiefs; the organ pealed forth; the choristers defiled out of the chancel; the pews were speedily cleared, the aisles left empty; and Reedbourne, greatly scandalised, found itself walking back home at least twenty minutes before it was expected there, while on every lip and every tongue there was but one inquiry:

"Who could have done it?"

Who *had* done it? For about five minutes there was wild work between Mr. Rodewald and his friend.

"What on earth possessed you?" was Mr. Rodewald's first question.

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. Smith.

"Why, of course, it was you called out 'Hear, hear!' I'll venture to say there is not another man in the parish so utterly lost to all sense of decency—I won't use so mild a word as decorum—as to have committed such a sacrilege; and what am I to say or to do about the matter I am sure I don't know."

"Unless you made the remark—which I confess struck me as wonderfully appropriate—I can't see why you should do anything. In any case, indeed, I think a masterly inactivity would be the wisest course you could adopt."

The preliminaries thus over, the fight began. Mr. Rodewald drew his sword and threw away the scabbard. Mr. Smith, who, though he did not care for battle, could hold his own, not merely stood upon the defensive, but drew blood from his adversary.

While it lasted, the engagement was heavy; but a sort of peace was finally patched up.

Even Mr. Rodewald found that when his friend meant business, discretion was by far the better part of valour. The lash of Mr. Smith's tongue might be light apparently, but he knew how to lay it on; he did not spare the weak spots or omit to touch the raw. He did not say very much; but what he said was to the purpose, and he might, for he felt just in the humour to speak out the worst half of his mind, have proceeded to give the gentleman who was aspiring to become a power in Reedbourne, some not very

palatable hints on that subject, when Mr. Rodewald brought the controversy to a point by saying,

"Well, if you assure me, upon your word of honour, Smith, that it was not you, of course I must believe myself mistaken, and there's an end of it."

Mr. Smith laughed scornfully.

"I wonder what you take me for? Why should I give you an assurance of the sort? Have you ever seen anything about me which should induce you to imagine it possible for me so far to forget myself as to take to 'brawling in church?' If I have no very high opinion of Mr. Rivers, I at least reverence the Master he professes to serve, and should no more think of misconducting myself in His house than of dancing a jig in the throne-room at Buckingham Palace."

"That's quite enough—more than enough!" exclaimed Mr. Rodewald.

"I am glad you are satisfied at last," remarked Mr. Smith, "though what could ever have induced you to impute such an act to me, I cannot imagine."

"But the sound certainly seemed to proceed from my pew."

"Yes, and there were two of us in it."

"No one could suspect me!" cried Mr. Rodewald, bristling up again.

"Why shouldn't you be suspected?" retorted Mr. Smith.

"Do you suppose you carry *all* your virtues graven on your face, or that utter strangers can have knowledge of the demon of conventionality which rules you with a rod of iron? But we needn't go over all that ground once more. I don't believe you opened your lips except to sing—which, by the way, you did, for a wonder, very much out of tune—and, as far as I am concerned, you may believe just what you please about me. I shall not discuss the question further; and if you don't let it drop, I will go straight back to town. I have no intention of spending a whole Sunday sparring with you."

"There has been a great change in you lately, Smith," observed Mr. Rodewald, with glowing cheeks.

"Has there? I am not singular; other people have changed too, and not for the better; but I don't mean to go on with this sort of thing. Make my apologies to Miss

Lydney, and send my bag on to-morrow to New Inn;" and actually Mr. Smith was turning off in the direction of the station, when Mr. Rodewald seized him by the arm, and with many protestations of friendship, respect, and even affection, declared they should not part after that fashion, and, insisting he had quite misunderstood the whole previous tendency of the conversation, gave him to understand nothing was further from his, Frantz Rodewald's, intention than even to suggest the idea he had meant to startle the proprieties of Reedbourne.

It was a very lame, though a full and almost abject, apology that Mr. Rodewald offered. Mr. Smith accepted it, however, in dumb silence; and they returned to The Snuggery, conversing as they went on such topics as the aspect of the country under water, the poorness of the pew accommodation in Reedbourne Church the unsatisfactory results achieved by the heating apparatus, the effects such long-continued rains were likely to produce on farming interests, with other subjects of a like dispassionate and interesting nature.

Upon each and all of them both gentlemen could have said a good deal that was excessively unpleasant; but they were upon their best behaviour; their courtesy was astonishing; and the tone of civil forbearance which characterised their conversation over dinner so marked that Miss Lydney, unaccustomed to such amenities as were observed between them, looked occasionally from one to the other in mute astonishment.

In the afternoon no one went out except Mr. Rodewald, who marched off through a drizzling rain to admire the effect of the floods as seen from Thamesford Bridge.

He invited Mr. Smith to accompany him; but that wise man answering he would go as far as the hall-door and no farther, Mr. Rodewald departed to soothe his perturbed spirit with a pipe and a walk all alone.

Mr. Smith talked to the children and told them stories till it grew quite dusk, and they were sitting in the firelight with no candles when the master of the house returned, saying he would not have missed the sight of the water going over the weir for any money which could have been offered him.

He was in such excellent spirits, Mr. Smith almost im-

aged he must have met with a pleasant adventure by the way; the contemplation of a hundred tons, more or less of water coming down from Oxford and flooding the Thames Valley could scarcely have produced such a beneficial change in his temper as had evidently been brought about by some cause.

During tea he wanted to know who was going to church, and received his friend's decided, "I am not, for one!" quite amiably, and without any of those allusions to Mr. Smith's inattention to both his worldly and spiritual affairs, with which he was usually wont to point the moral and adorn the tale of his own very different mode of procedure. Annie wished to accompany her father, but Miss Lydney declared somewhat sharply she was not going to have any tramping through muddy roads, and trouble of nursing sore throats for days afterwards. To Mr. Smith's surprise, Mr. Rodewald expressed his opinion that his sister-in-law was right. "You know you were complaining of a pain in your chest yesterday, Annie. Better do as your aunt tells you;" which remark, so far apparently from giving satisfaction to Miss Lydney, sent her flouncing out of the room in a manner Mr. Smith had never previously seen her make her exit.

When Mr. Cheverley's tenant had gone off to listen to all the good things that were to be heard at Reedbourne Church, Miss Lydney sent the children to amuse themselves in another room, and, taking possession of an easy-chair in front of the drawing-room fire, opened her mind to Mr. Smith. According to her statement, everything was going wrong "since he," referring to Mr. Rodewald, "became acquainted with those horrible people at View Water. He has not been like the same person," she said; "nothing I do, or can do, pleases him. He is always finding fault. He is vexed because I can't care for his grand ladies, and they don't care for me. I would be ashamed to keep such a wasteful house and set of idle, useless servants as Mrs. Posinby does. Besides, we are not rich as they are. If I had not saved and worked, and never thought of sparing myself, I should like to know how he and the girls would have been off. And he is dissatisfied with the girls, too. He wants them, he says, to be brought up more like young ladies. Annie he talks of sending to school. Why, as I

told him, he may as well say he means to break Susan's heart at once!"

Mr. Smith listened in silence; he did not interrupt the flow of Miss Lydney's eloquence by a word; and it was not till at length she stopped short in the middle almost of a sentence, and asked, pitifully, "What should you advise me to do?" that he opened his mouth and answered, "Nothing!"

She looked at him, reproachfully, and he went on,

"You can do nothing, except what it is perhaps too much to expect from any woman—refrain from speech, and wait the progress of events. Ever since Rodewald came to view this place I have anticipated some such change as you describe; his new acquaintances have only accelerated its coming. The best advice I think I can offer you is to try to accommodate yourself to going up in the world. After all, you know, it is a natural feeling for a man to wish to rise. There was a time in my own life when I hoped to climb—and climb high. Besides, Rodewald is only in the prime of life, as one may say; he is in many respects young—physically I mean; he has worked tremendously hard, and I don't see that any one ought to grudge him social success."

"I thought you might comfort, or, if you could not do that, I believed you would sympathise with me," said Miss Lydney, reproachfully.

"In my best days I never was much of a hand at putting a false gloss on unpleasant matters, and indeed I do not think it is good policy to do so. Better face an ill than run away from it. You cannot put Rodewald back where he was before he took this house, and I am sure what you ought to do is make up your mind to go along with him; because, if you do not, I am afraid he will leave you behind."

"I can't go with him, and that's the end of it!" exclaimed Miss Lydney.

"A pity," observed Mr. Smith; and there ensued a short silence.

"He is talking," began Miss Lydney, "if he gives up The Snuggery at Michaelmas, of going into lodgings for the winter at Hampsfield."

"O!"

"Yes, and the next thing I am sure I expect to hear is that he is going to be married."

Mr. Smith smiled quite involuntarily.

"I don't see what there is to laugh at," said Miss Lydney.

"I am not laughing. I was only wondering if Miss Wickenden had stalked him down."

"No; he does not like her."

"Then who else is there in or near Hampsfield?"

"Goodness only knows!"

"I do not think he is contemplating matrimony, at all events, at present," remarked Mr. Smith. "I fancy he would have thrown out some hint to me of his intentions. Now, if I were you, Miss Lydney, I should try to meet his wishes as far as you can. Get a servant, or servants, as he has a fancy in that direction. Advise him to send Annie to school in Reedbourne or Hampsfield, supposing there is a school in either of those places. Go to church with him if he wishes you to do so, in order to convince society that you are not stopping at home to cook the dinner. After all, it is not much the man wants you to do or leave undone."

"That may be your idea, Mr. Smith," said Miss Lydney, tartly; and she rose and went away to "look after supper," almost as angry with her brother-in-law's friend as she had been with her brother-in-law himself. Over supper, to which meal Mr. Rodewald brought a hearty appetite and the same good temper he had extracted from the sight of the water pouring over Thamesford weir, he was quite particular in his inquiries as to the time Mr. Smith wanted to return to London next morning.

"As early as possible," said Mr. Smith.

"I sha'n't be going up till the middle of the day," explained Mr. Rodewald.

"Going to see the floods again?"

"No; though I might do worse."

"I shall take a last look at them," remarked Mr. Smith, "for I mean to walk over to Thamesford and catch a train there."

If he expected Mr. Rodewald to offer to accompany him in this expedition he was agreeably disappointed. He was next morning allowed to leave alone; and, though pressed to remain longer, and asked to repeat his visit very soon, it

struck him that Mr. Rodewald was well pleased to see his guest depart, and that there was a certain sham heartiness about that gentleman's invitation he had never before noticed.

"If he means to take lodgings in Hampsfield he must be intending to make a pot of money out of Posinby," thought Mr. Smith as he strode along. "Well, I don't see why he shouldn't. When a man begins throwing his money to the dogs, one dog may as well have it as another."

Meanwhile, Mr. Rodewald was walking briskly through the village. It was still early, but he went straight to the Rectory, and, asking the butler if he could speak for a moment, to Mr. Rivers, was shown into a little waiting-room, generally reserved for the use of those parishioners who were not considered rich enough or grand enough to be made free of the library.

Mr. Rodewald was unacquainted with the ways of the house, never having been inside it before; but still he felt vexed at not being shown into the Rector's presence at once.

The butler said his master was at breakfast, and, indeed, the smell of coffee and fried ham, and a tray standing on the hall-table, proclaimed the fact.

"Would you mind walking this way, please, sir?" asked the butler, again opening the door. "Mr. Rivers's cough is so very bad this morning that he is afraid of venturing into a room where there is no fire."

"Humph! it is as cold for me as it is for him," thought Mr. Rodewald; but he did not speak; he only followed the butler in silence.

Mr. Rivers was breakfasting in his library, an apartment which combined the advantage of an agreeable seclusion from the rest of the house and a cheerful look-out over the graveyard. No want of heat in that room, where a splendid fire went blazing up the chimney; no lack of company either. Mr. Grey stood on the hearth, Mr. De Field beside the window, and several other gentlemen, whom the new-comer knew only by sight, were also present.

"How do you do, Mr. Rodewald," said Mr. Rivers, rising from table and greeting his visitor with a sort of tempered cordiality, which implied that, though he extended his hand to him as one of the dearly beloved brethren he

addressed on Sundays, he could not forget, while there are many mansions in the next world, there are wide social distinctions in this. "*Won't* you be seated? *Have* you breakfasted? *Yes*? Ah! Of *course* you are early! I, *myself*, am generally early too; but—" and here Mr. Rivers coughed plaintively, and all the persons assembled looked at each other, as much as to say, "This is a bad business;" and Mr. Rodewald murmured how truly sorry he felt to find his spiritual adviser's cold was no better; and then there ensued an awkward pause, during which every person present seemed waiting to be told what had brought Mr. Rodewald to the Rectory.

"I experience a great awkwardness in opening my business," began the gentleman, who certainly at that moment would have given a great deal to find himself back again at The Snuggery, but who, being, as he reflected, "in for it," assumed a courage he was far from feeling. "Fact is, in order that there might be no misapprehension on the subject, I thought I had better call this morning respecting the unpleasant little incident which occurred yesterday morning in church."

"I don't *think* it is necessary, I *really* do not," said Mr. Rivers, in his suavest tone.

"Pardon me," observed Mr. Rodewald, "but explanation seems to me imperative; you don't know my friend, or understand how utterly incapable he is of treating any—any one in your position with disrespect. He is the last man in the world to have so far forgotten himself; and I have come here to say, on his behalf, he was not guilty of that astounding and well-nigh inconceivable piece of impertinence."

There came from the direction where Mr. De Field stood a sound which might have been variously interpreted as a sigh of relief, a scoff of incredulity, or a warning note of battle; but Mr. Rivers never looked towards the window, as he answered deprecatingly,

"I *think* we had better let the matter drop, Mr. Rodewald; I do *indeed*!"

"More particularly as we are now all agreed the unseemly interruption did not proceed from your friend," said Mr. De Field, addressing the company generally rather than Mr. Rodewald in particular.

"I am very glad—extremely glad to hear that statement," observed Mr. Rodewald, looking defiantly at his enemy.

With a sneer and a jeering laugh, Mr. De Field turned to a gentleman close beside him and made some remark, which, though evidently uttered in disparagement of Mr. Smith or himself, Mr. Rodewald failed to catch.

"Yes; if you will kindly convey the sense of the meeting to your friend, I shall be *so* much obliged," interposed Mr. Rivers, who was clearly getting nervous.

"I am sure," added Mr. Grey, "I ought to call and beg his pardon, for I really did think it was he."

"And so did several of the congregation," persisted Mr. De Field, "till I put them right."

"And now please," entreated Mr. Rivers, "we will not say another word on the subject. I feel infinitely obliged to you, Mr. Rodewald, for calling this morning—thank you, thank you;" and holding out his hand, he would thus, in a masterly manner, have dismissed his visitor, but that Mr. Rodewald, finding he was somehow checkmated, though it baffled him to understand in what way, said,

"But I scarcely comprehend—"

"As a personal favour, I must *beg* of you, Mr. Rodewald, to say no more about this matter," interrupted the Rector. "I *assure* you I require no explanation or apology, or anything, except that you will banish the whole affair from your memory, as I mean to banish it from mine."

"Explanation! apology!" gasped Mr. Rodewald, for once fairly thrown off his mental balance. "Good Heavens! do you take me for the culprit? I, who would as soon have thought of cutting my throat as to misconducting myself! I, who—"

"Pray excuse me, Mr. Rodewald"—it was Mr. Grey who spoke—"but don't you see how you are agitating our beloved Rector? he is in such a delicate state of health he cannot bear any excitement. You know how dear he is to us all—how kind and considerate; I am sure you will forgive me asking you to be considerate also. You want the discussion ended, don't you, sir?" he went on, addressing Mr. Rivers, who had sunk into an easy-chair, and, from its depths, murmured, plaintively, "Yes."

Then arose in the room a buzzing chorus to the same effect, which somehow carried Mr. Rodewald to the door.

whither he was accompanied by Mr. Grey and three other gentlemen.

He wanted to tell them in the hall how utterly innocent he was, but the executive would talk of nothing but their "dear Rector's" state of health.

There was no one to argue with, no one to brow-beat, no one to threaten. Most courteously, and as if the whole four felt very sorry for him, Mr. Rodewald found himself, by the dint merely of gentle moral force, turned out on the wet gravel, to consider what he had made by his motion, and to swear to himself that, if ever the chance offered of balancing accounts, he would not let it slip by unimproved.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MISS WICKENDEN'S SURMISES.

MR. SMITH's chambers, on a second floor in New Inn, consisted of two rooms placed side by side, and a wide hall which was in its way really another apartment. In this hall, on a certain dull damp day in the early spring of the same year when Mr. Rodewald expressed himself in such enthusiastic terms about the water in the Thames Valley, a printer's devil sat waiting till the author, who was writing within, should see fit to bring him out that bundle of copy for which the "compositors were standing still."

This was the usual form memoranda to Mr. Smith assumed; therefore it may be concluded either that he did not hurry over his work, or that he had more work to do than he could get through.

The boy had been waiting a long time in a silence unbroken save by the noise made by the progress of a rapid pen over the paper, when on the outer door there commenced a modest but continuous rapping. It was a very timid and irritating sort of tapping, such as a woodpecker might have made if it had expected a lion to jump out of the trunk of the tree on which it was operating.

"Come in," shouted Mr. Smith through the door of his sitting-room, which stood half open. "Come in!" he re-

peated, finding the tapping went on and that no notice whatever was taken of his permission to enter.

"See who that is, will you?" he called to the young gentleman with an exceedingly dirty face and torn jacket, waiting for copy; and then, before the boy could do his bidding, fairly losing his temper, at the feeble and exasperating knocking, he took three long steps to the door, flung it wide, and beheld—Miss Wickenden, in a state of shyness, nervousness, confusion, maiden bashfulness, feminine tremor, which altogether transcended any former experience of that fair charmer; Miss Wickenden, with her head a good deal on one side, her ringlets out of curl, an unusual colour in her elderly cheeks and a deeper colour still at the end of her aquiline nose, her knuckles upraised as if in the act of tapping at the door which had been so suddenly thrown wide; Miss Wickenden, palpitating, fluttering, "ready to sink through the ground" with shame, and yet striving to greet the unexpected apparition of the man she sought with a sickly deprecating smile; Miss Wickenden, the last person in the world Mr. Smith expected to behold on his landing, and a person he certainly did not wish to behold there or anywhere else.

"Miss Wickenden!" he said, too much astonished to say more.

"Yes, indeed," she gasped out. "*I hope* I have not done something very dreadful. *I thought* you would forgive me. I wanted to speak to you so much, and I—"

"Won't you walk in?" suggested Mr. Smith, whose wits were now restored to him; and he gallantly ushered her across the antechamber—where the boy, who had resumed his seat, sat dangling his legs and holding a ragged cap in both his hands, as though too rare and precious a possession to be rashly trusted out of his own keeping—and into the inner room—the holy of holies, as Miss Wickenden, judging from her manner, seemed to consider it.

"Pray excuse me for one moment," he said when his visitor was seated—not "too near the fire" and with "her back to the light." "The lad from the printer's is waiting for this; I will just make up the parcel and get rid of him, and then I shall be quite at your service."

To state that the expression with which Miss Wickenden regarded Mr. Smith, as he hurriedly sorted over the written

sheets and placed them in order, was rapturous, utterly fails to convey an idea of the reverential, almost worshipping, devotion depicted in her face. For her to see him thus—at home at work, in a loose morning-coat, with his slippers down at heel, with his papers strewn carelessly about, and the ink still wet in his pen—was too much happiness. She sat with clasped hands and adoring eyes, while Mr. Smith, busily engaged in putting his manuscript into ship-shape, was wondering “what the deuce had brought the woman there.”

“Now, Miss Wickenden,” he said, when, having despatched the boy and made fast the outer door, he reentered the sitting-room, and took up his former position by the table, “to what fortunate circumstance am I indebted for the honour of this visit?”

Miss Wickenden raised her eyes to the ceiling, and her lips moved, though no sound escaped from them. Judging from her expression, she might have been engaged in silent prayer, but Mr. Smith knew better. Mentally she was apostrophising his numerous good qualities—in a transport of gushing rapture she was invoking Heaven’s choicest blessings on his head.

Mr. Smith sat balancing a penholder on his left forefinger, and waited patiently till it should seem good to the lady to speak. He knew very well she had not come there to contemplate him, delightful though she undoubtedly found that exercise. More serious matter, he felt convinced, lay behind, but he did not intend to drag it out of her by any cross-examination.

“She is more anxious to talk than I am to hear,” he thought. “She’ll begin shortly;” which in effect Miss Wickenden did, heralding the approach of words by sundry little coughs, indicative at once of shyness, modesty, and reluctance.

“I am sure I don’t know how to apologise sufficiently,” she said, with a graceful hesitation and a touching confidence.

“Pray do not try,” suggested Mr. Smith. “I hope it is unnecessary for me to say that it will give me great pleasure if I can be of the slightest service to you or Mrs. Posinby.”

Ah, if he had only stopped at the “you,” and left Mrs. Posinby’s name out altogether, how happy Miss Wickenden

would have felt ! But, then, she considered he might deem such a statement, under the circumstances, as lacking in delicacy.

"Thank you—thank you so very, very much !" cried the lady ; "it is almost entirely on that poor child's behalf I have ventured to take a step which my devotion to her interests alone could excuse ; for I am sure I need not tell you, Mr. Smith, I would never, never have committed the indiscretion of coming to your chambers on my own account."

Mr. Smith looked at his visitor, and inclined his head gravely. His manner was that of one who should say, prudence was an excellent quality in a woman.

"It was only," went on Miss Wickenden, doubtless reassured by the grave respect of her true love's manner "after long deliberation I determined to consult you. I felt"—with a pensive and inquiring smile—"I ought not to allow any foolish fears or scruples with respect to placing myself in a false position in the eyes of one whose opinion I value so highly, so *immensely* as I do yours, to deter me from doing my duty where Ethel was concerned. Though I say it, Mr. Smith, I always have considered her before myself."

Still balancing the penholder, and apparently vitally interested in his occupation, Mr. Smith managed to murmur, "Only what I should have expected ;" "Such affection is creditable to both ;" "Your devotion must touch Mrs. Posinby sensibly."

"That is precisely the point I am coming to," answered Miss Wickenden, putting her handkerchief to her eyes. "There *was* a time when Ethel understood I had sacrificed my life to her ; but things are changed now. I believe at this present minute she regards me as—as—her enemy."

"Why should she do that ?" asked Mr. Smith, laying the penholder down on the table, and loosely folding his hands together, as he bent a little forward to regard Miss Wickenden with more attention than he had yet exhibited.

"Because some one has come between us—"

"O !" said Mr. Smith.

"And his name is—but no, I won't mention names just at present. I want you first to tell me your candid opinion of Mr. Rodewald."

"Good Heavens, Miss Wickenden, you might as well ask me to tell you of my own knowledge the source of the Nile!"

"But that is ridiculous," exclaimed Miss Wickenden, pettishly. "You must understand the nature of a man with whom you have been, and are, so intimate."

"I don't think that follows, Miss Wickenden. The fact is, women are fond of the sort of analysis you indicate, but men are not. For one reason, we are too busy; for another, the wisdom of trying to understand our friends seems to me, at any rate, very questionable. If they are pleasant and congenial, if they enable us to pass a sunshiny day happily, and are fairly stanch in a wet one, what more do we want?"

"A good deal, I should say," amended Miss Wickenden.

"Well, it is entirely a matter of taste, which we need not discuss now. As for Rodewald he has been to me an agreeable acquaintance, and, on occasion, a kind friend. I never thought of writing a treatise on him, or I might have found myself in a position to answer your singular question with a greater degree of exactness."

"It is no laughing matter to me, Mr. Smith," said Miss Wickenden, reproachfully.

"My dear lady, if you would only be kind enough to explain your meaning, I think we should get on a great deal better."

"My meaning is this," answered Miss Wickenden, goaded to a confession she desired to have indefinitely delayed. Since *your* friend Mr. Rodewald has become so intimate with *my* friend, everything seems to be going wrong between Ethel and myself. She is capricious, fretful, unjust."

"Am I to understand you attribute these changes—if, indeed, they are changes—in Mrs. Posinby's nature to the influence of Mr. Rodewald?"

"Yes, distinctly. Till he essayed the post of vizier, prime minister, head adviser, what you will, Ethel was content with *my* advice, *my* sympathy, *my* assistance; but now—O, dear me!"

Mr. Smith meditatively regarded Miss Wickenden, a she concluded her speech in this inconsequent manner,

emphasising her last words with a toss of her head, and a pursing up of her thin lips.

"And supposing," he suggested—"which, however, I do not admit—that these painful results have been caused by Mr. Rodewald's interference, how do you imagine I can set matters right? You have not even told me what Mr. Rodewald does to prejudice Mrs. Posinby against you."

"He has constituted himself captain of the ship," explained Miss Wickenden; "he is all-powerful; his word is law; he has established an influence over both husband and wife which to me is, I confess, inexplicable."

"He is an exceedingly able man, you must bear in mind."

"Mr. Smith, is he an honest one?"

Mr. Smith smiled.

"Well, certainly, Miss Wickenden, your speech is not flattering," he said. "Why do you imagine he should be otherwise? Surely you do not believe he would pick a pocket or rob a church?"

"No, I do not," she answered; "but there are other and worse ways of being dishonest than that. If he has no interest to serve, why should he meddle in affairs that are no concern of his? If he is really anxious to benefit Mr. and Mrs. Posinby, why does he not induce the former to amend his ways, instead of doing all he possibly can to separate Ethel and myself?"

"It is difficult for me to reply to your last question; but, as regards the former, I have been given to understand the man does not exist who could prevail on Mr. Posinby to reform."

"No one could ever accuse me of undue partiality for Louis Posinby; but he is a prince, a king, in comparison to Mr. Rodewald!"

"Poor Mr. Rodewald! What has he done to incur your displeasure?"

"I'll tell you what he is doing, Mr. Smith: he is playing his cards, playing a deep, deep game—a game so designing, if I were Mr. Posinby I should order him out of the house, and never suffer him to reenter it!"

In undisguised amazement Mr. Smith stared at his visitor.

"I am not an inquisitive man," he said, at last, "but I

confess you have piqued my curiosity. What design do you suppose Mr. Rodewald has conceived?"

"Are you unable to guess?"

"Totally. I am utterly at sea as to your meaning."

"Yet it is plain enough. He intends to marry Mrs. Posinby!"

"But he can't. In the present imperfect state of the English law, a lady is not permitted to have two husbands."

"Well, you will see. I cannot tell you how I feel even hinting at such a thing; but, remember, Ethel would be a great catch, a *very* great catch, for a person in his position."

"But, my dear Miss Wickenden, the thing is impossible. A man can't marry a lady who has already a husband, unless—"

He suddenly stopped, and looked hard at Miss Wickenden, who, coyly averting her eyes and drooping her eyelids, and skilfully manipulating her handkerchief, murmured *pianissimo*,

"Yes, that is my trouble, Mr. Smith; that is what is literally breaking my heart!"

"You are quite mistaken," said Mr. Smith, decidedly. "You wrong Rodewald. Whatever faults he may have, I can say positively I know he would not commit a sin such as you indicate. You may make your mind quite easy on that score. Rodewald will never cause a scandal between husband and wife."

"If I could only possess your faith!"

"You may, then. I don't say that, in serving Mr. Posinby, Rodewald may not be serving himself as well; but he means no treachery as regards the wife. It is a pity you were not plain with me at first, Miss Wickenden, and I could have relieved your mind sooner. You may put that notion on one side utterly; it has not the slightest foundation, in fact."

Miss Wickenden sighed heavily; then she said, with a pathetic smile,

"There is one other thing I want to say before I go, if I may. I wish to say it now, as I may never enter these dear, quiet rooms again."

If she expected Mr. Smith to ask her to repeat her visit she was disappointed. If he had spoken out his mind he would perhaps have said that, while discretion was a

beautiful thing in all women, it was more peculiarly beautiful in those who had attained to the sere and yellow leaf period of existence; but he made no answer to her hint, except to remark he should be sorry if she left without mentioning any other matter she might have in her mind.

"You will not be offended?" she entreated.

"It is impossible for me to answer that question till I know what you are going to say," he answered; "but I am not easily offended, and I feel sure you would not hurt me willingly."

"Willingly!" she repeated; and her tone was so gushing, Mr. Smith instantly repented him of his utterance.

"No, *indeed, indeed* I wouldn't—you know I wouldn't!"

"And what is this great matter?" he asked, with an affectation of liveliness which was far from real. "Nothing so dreadful as the last, I hope?"

"No; it is only this: in the course of conversation, Mr. Rodewald has indicated—nay, why do I not speak plainly?—Mr. Rodewald has said, quite straightforwardly, that—O, how am I to express myself?"

"That I haven't two sixpences to jingle together, perhaps," supplied Mr. Smith.

"Well, something of that dreadful sort—you know his brusque, bluff, rude way; and what I wanted to ask you was this. Dear old Mr. Harridge left me a certain sum of money."

"Yes?" said Mr. Smith, as Miss Wickenden paused, overwhelmed with shame at her own audacity. "Why, I might be proposing to the darling fellow," she reflected; and, indeed, she was making a very long step in that direction.

"And, of course"—she hesitated for a moment, and then proceeded—"I have spent little or nothing since the kind creature's death, and the interest has been added to the principal; and I have never lent any of it, though Ethel—it may seem incredible, but it is true—has more than once suggested I should intrust it to the keeping of her wild spendthrift husband; and—really, now, the sum is not so very insignificant, and—and—O, Mr. Smith, do, pray, help me! I cannot go on!" and, in an access of modesty, Miss Wickenden covered her face with her hands, and left Mr. Smith to take up the burden of what was to follow.

Just for an instant he paused. If he did not feel very

much obliged to, he felt sorry for, her. She was, at ~~all~~ events, offering him all she had in the world ; and, though the "all" did not seem much worth in his eyes, the remembrance ran through his mind of the old proverb, which advises us not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"If I read your kind words aright," he said, "you want, generously, to offer to lend me—"

She made a gesture of dissent, and gasped out, "No—give—give—"

"Lend me," he repeated, resolutely refusing to hear this amendment, "a legacy, which I am sure Mr. Harridge could not have bequeathed more judiciously. I will not try to express my gratitude, because I cannot, but I feel your goodness sensibly. At the same time, I should be an even poorer creature than Mr. Rodewald's friendship represents me if I were to take advantage of your trust and inexperience. Follow my advice, Miss Wickenden," he added, smiling, "and lend your money to no one ; and when you marry have it strictly settled on yourself."

"I shall never marry," answered Miss Wickenden, mournfully. "In all my life I have only met one person—" and she put out her hand hesitatingly.

Mr. Smith took it without any hesitation at all, and shook it heartily with an air of dreadful unconsciousness.

"Whoever that person may be, he ought to feel grateful for your good opinion."

"I don't think he is," almost sobbed Miss Wickenden, as her "affinity" released the hand he had taken ; and then somehow it was all over, and she was going downstairs with her veil drawn close over her face, and Mr. Smith, standing in the middle of his room, was exclaiming,

"Thank Heaven, that matter's settled !"

Then he took a turn or two from window to door and from door to window.

"Daisies and buttercups with a vengeance," he thought ; "innocence and dewy meads, and all the rest of it into the bargain. Why, I've lived in this wicked world, within ten years, as long as that fair enchantress, and such a notion as she profounded concerning Rodewald would never have crossed my mind. Rodewald a Don Juan ! Bless and save us ! I think I must go and call on Cheverley after that, in order to restore my faith in my fellow-creatures."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT THE FERRY.

IF the "great work," on which, according to Mr. Rodewald, his friend had been engaged on for so long a period, and which, as far as Mr. Cheverley's tenant could discover, never advanced a page nearer to completion, chanced to be a novel, it might be supposed that the constant amount of study Mr. Smith devoted to the German's character was given with the artistic view of rendering one at least of the personages portrayed as lifelike as possible.

Mr. Rodewald was, in fact, a mental puzzle Mr. Smith never wearied trying to solve—a moral kaleidoscope he never tired of shaking. Though the bits of glass in his nature might be the same, the combinations they presented were ever fresh and new; and, though rarely, indeed never, beautiful, proved far more interesting to Miss Wickenden's latest affinity than the contemplation of virtue, goodness, and sweet simplicity could, by any possibility, have done.

For it is a fact—lamentable, perhaps, yet true—that, constituted as we are, if there were no sin in the world men would find it somewhat stupid. If we did not know evil we could not appreciate good. All the powers of the human mind are scarcely called into action merely to outwit guileless innocence; but even a shrewd intellect is strained to guard against the wiles of a clever and unscrupulous adversary. Beggar my neighbour can scarcely be considered a mentally exciting game to follow; but put a couple of good men down with a chessboard between them, and—what then?

Mr. Smith regarded Mr. Rodewald as a player of extraordinary merit, and watched his game with unflagging ardour and admiring appreciation. Of course he knew he would win, but he delighted to follow the movements of his pieces; to observe his discomfiture whenever a pawn was captured; to see him steal cautiously up for checkmate, and then, when his plan was discovered and frustrated, take his knight off in some quite opposite direction, as though his previous attempt had been the last in the world with which he meant to produce the effect imagined.

Now that he was getting almost out of his dear friend's clutches—now, when, by dint of well-nigh inconceivable toil, and bare living and stinting, not merely of every possible luxury, but what most persons would have deemed actual necessities as well, he had reduced the once formidable mountain of debt to a comparative molehill, and dared to think what he had paid in the way of gigantic interest; the valuable time he had lost in loitering about the City to see Mr. Rodewald, who, at one time, like other great men, was often not to be met with, inclining rather to keep waiting than to wait; the price for which he had sold his labour in order to avoid having to ask for favours, from one who always exacted a price for them in meal or in malt—Mr. Smith began to regret he had not, in days departed, been able to bring a calm and judicial mind to bear on the Rodewald enigma, that he had permitted many chances of studying his character to slip by him, that he had taken so many things for granted, and failed really to trace streams of rare interest to their fountain-head.

For all these reasons, and, perhaps, because he was a man who could not bear to part lightly with any old possession, even if that possession were not so good as might be desired, Mr. Smith once again began to what Mr. Rodewald called "drift"—that is, he often deferred the "simple" matter of "arranging" his impending bills till the eleventh, or, indeed, half-past eleventh, hour, and then asked for help, with an assurance which, as his friend once told him, "bordered on impudence."

He was not, as formerly, often asked down to The Snuggery, Mr. Rodewald evidently considering his powers of self-denial might prove unequal to the task of saying no; and he was not now wanted there, either to go out to dinner, or to talk to, concerning the iniquities of Reedbourne.

Mr. Cheverley's tenant had changed all that. He was as much *au fait* with the manners and customs of Thames Valley society as though he had been weaned on palms, begonias, and *entrées*, and sucked in small-talk with his mother's milk. In a dress-coat and a white tie he now felt quite as easy as when clothed in a suit of hodden gray. He had taken a first instead of a second class season-ticket, and felt more at home in the View Water landau than he had ever done behind that intractable St. George, who was

now ignominiously earning his daily bread between the shafts of a butcher's cart, driven at express speed by a bare-headed youth without a whip, who yet produced effects in the way of clearing the Reedbourne roads that scared old ladies, and scandalised mothers who did not desire the untimely death of their unpromising brood.

Nevertheless, as there are persons who cannot understand even their prayers unless they utter their petitions aloud, so Mr. Rodewald, feeling occasionally his thoughts and aspirations too vast to be pent within the limits of his own mind—great as that mind was—could not help feeling glad when the occasional visits of Mr. Smith to his office in the City afforded opportunity for that sharpening of iron which, upon the best authority, we are informed, man is to man.

Hearing Mr. Rodewald talk, declaim, like Saul, breathe forth threatenings, and prophesy after the fashion of a previous Saul, Mr. Smith satisfied himself the fair Wickenden was indeed utterly mistaken, and that no plot for the destruction of Mr. Posinby's domestic peace, so far, at least, as his wife chanced to be concerned, was afoot.

The strongest trait in Mr. Rodewald's nature, to which even the love of money, save as a means of ministering to his master passion, was secondary—the desire for power, and determination to obtain it—had led him to seize the View Water connection as the best rope he had ever before been given the chance of handling.

Circumstances alter cases. The surroundings of a man's life influence him more than the cleverest and most capable person in existence would, perhaps, care to confess. Had Mr. Cheverley never advertised The Snuggery to be let furnished, and Mr. Rodewald, going down to view, never met with a "flat" for landlord, he would most likely have sent his children down to Southend or some Hertfordshire farm for change of air; and, retaining his unfurnished part of a house at Islington, as times mended, centred his ambitions on becoming rector's churchwarden or guardian for the poor, and upraising his voice at vestry and committee meetings. The great possibilities presented by the Valley of the Thames had, however, demoralised him, as it has an unfortunate habit of demoralising many more worthy persons. From the moment he took tickets for self and friend at the

Waterloo Station the deteriorating process began ; and it was enough for him to look at The Snuggery in order to regard it as the fortress whence he would sally forth to ravage the fair county of Surrey for position, society, and consideration.

"There are very few men who could have done what I have," he said once to Mr. Smith.

"There are very few men who would," amended Mr. Smith ; but this was in the after days, when there was war to the knife between the two men.

At the period when Mr. Smith went searching after the View Water secret, if there were one, the pair were friends, so far at least as outward seeming. To say that Mr. Rodewald did no want his old acquaintance down at The Snuggery as formerly is merely to observe that other times obtained amongst the daisies and the buttercups, and other manners with them.

The man who is more than welcome at one period proves *de trop* at another. Mr. Rodewald had gone a long way ahead since that memorable Easter Sunday when he silenced Mr. De Field's "bawling" with a wink, and Mr. Smith had, if anything, gone back.

He was "queerer, more crotchety, less reliable than ever," decided Mr. Rodewald ; "more likely to get a person into scrapes," which was an extremely ungrateful and inconsistent idea on the part of that gentleman, inasmuch as he did not in the least believe Mr. Smith took act or part in that little "hear, hear" matter ; while, moreover, he (Mr. Rodewald) pledged his word, as a gentleman, a German, a Christian, and a Reedbournian, that his friend was totally incapable of so insulting one whom all the world must respect, namely, their excellent Rector, Mr. Rivers.

He said this and a great deal more to Mr. Grey, betwixt whom and himself a species of unholy alliance had latterly been struck up. Mr. Grey listened in silence. He had his doubts about that grim-faced long-limbed man some one told him was "on *Punch* ;" and though the verdict of the whole clerical party in the parish eventually went in favour of Smith and against Rodewald himself, Mr. Grey, who perhaps knew more of the De Field faction which led the van than his self-spoken chief, secretly inclined to the opinion that, let people think what they pleased, the "comic" man was the culprit.

With the concurrence of his excellent Rector, who, next to tithes, loved peace, Mr. Grey had, after that unfortunate interview at the Rectory, "edged up" to Mr. Rodewald, walking with that enterprising gentleman to the station on the occasion of his rare visits to London; looking out at the Reedbourne and Waterloo Stations for his new friend, who, though a first-class "season," was wont, on such occasions, to so far descend from his pecuniary eminence as, with a touching humility, to travel third in the company of the Reedbourne curate, who ordinarily took a book with him, so that he might not have to enter into familiar converse with any of the poorer order of sheep he was, by a complete fiction, supposed to tend.

On these occasions Mr. Rodewald was asked many curious questions, which at first he put down to a laudable interest in matters which really could not at all directly concern the Reverend Lionel; but it very soon dawned upon him that Mr. Grey's spirit of inquiry regarding writs, legal processes, the powers conferred by her Most Gracious Majesty upon solicitors, judges, commissioners, sheriffs, sheriffs' officers, and suchlike, had been roused to action by some much more personal feeling than abstract sympathy, or even a great compassion for that "poor Mr. Gresham, whose home, I am given to understand, is in the hands of brokers."

It was while all these changes, and many more too numerous to mention, were in progress that Mr. Smith sought Mr. Rodewald's office more frequently than of yore, and heard several facts and conjectures about various matters which it did not then seem to him were calculated materially to influence the life-story of either of them.

Mr. Rodewald was specially irate concerning the way "that thief Holway had jockeyed Cheverley out of the Lord alone knew how much money."

"I don't profess," he said, "to feel extreme sorrow about the affair, because my good landlord is so unmitigated a prig one really cannot weep bitter tears at a little of the starch being taken out of his shirt-front; still, he ought to have known better. Holway is a fellow I should like to see up at the Mansion House for obtaining money by false pretences. 'Wife and children, children and wife!' that was always his cry. Used to come to me,

smelling of gin, bemoaning his ill-fortune, and so forth. 'Why, man,' I told him once, 'you've bartered those daisy-meads of yours over and over again to the distillers for half-quarterns of your favourite liquor.' "

"It was a nice calculation," observed Mr. Smith.

"Well, and, you see, the ground isn't worth twenty pounds an acre as ground, and it's not ripe for building—won't be this many a year, so many houses are being run up on the Leytonstone Road—no use attempting anything of that sort. If my people had got the land, there's just one way they might have recouped themselves. I had the notion all chalked out, even the plans drawn."

"Had you, now?"

"Yes; and I do think it might have enabled them to pull themselves home, and leave a margin of profit; but he'll find the concern a dead loss, and serve him right—"

"You can't put him up to your dodge, then?"

"No; why on earth should I? As he has sown, let him reap. He won't even sell me those barren fields down at Reedbourne, and I'm sure I made him enough offer."

That day Mr. Smith left the City exercised in his mind. What could Mr. Rodewald's Leytonstone project have which Mr. Cheverley's money had knocked on the head? He puzzled himself over this question sorely till one day in the columns of the *Times*, his eyes chanced to light on the prospectus of "The Stratford and East Middlesex Cemetery Company (Limited)," and amongst the directors the name of F. Rodewald, Esq.

"H—m!" thought Mr. Smith. "I will sit down at once and leave directions I am not to be buried there. Live or dead, Rodewald would take one in if he got the shadow of a chance."

But for ever the Posinby enigma remained unsolved. With all his endeavours—and Mr. Smith really did, after the best fashion, exert himself to fathom the mystery—he never succeeded in finding out what the unfortunate sinner who, at an evil hour, married that "gentle trusting Ethel," had really done or left undone.

Mr. Rodewald hinted at forgery, theft, misrepresentation, misappropriation; but he totally refused to descend to particulars. And Mr. Smith could only gather, from the

statements of all parties, that Mr. Posinby was awfully afraid of something, that he felt he held his liberty by the slightest thread, and that therefore he was making the money spin, and betting and drinking more than ever; and that Mr. Rodewald was his truest friend, and had been installed as manager of affairs in general, and comforter of that poor dear creature Ethel in particular.

With both of which arrangements every one, from the lawyers down, seemed satisfied, except Miss Wickenden.

"That woman lays herself out to oppose me," said Mr. Rodewald, wrathfully. "You were wise, Smith, to have nothing to do with her—a foolish, jealous old hag, who can't, or won't, see I am trying to keep the husband out of gaol and the wife from the disgrace he would bring upon her. . . She does not like new ways, she says, and the old times were best, and so forth. Old times, indeed!" And with a contemptuous gesture, Mr. Rodewald took up a pencil and threw it indignantly upon his desk.

"You must remember," urged Mr. Smith, in defence of his absent love, "all ladies are Conservatives."

"If you said all ladies were fools, you would be nearer the mark!" retorted Mr. Rodewald, with much more decision than gallantry.

Of course he knew there were reasons why the Wickenden alliance was never likely to come to anything, and felt, therefore, he need not strive further to "arrange" that match.

Mr. Smith laughed, and went back to New Inn, pondering as he paced the stony-hearted streets.

Singularly enough he was seeing a good deal in those days of that hopeless, wretched, irreclaimable sinner Louis Posinby.

The vagabond course of his own uncomfortable life took him into byways which are not usually all traversed even by such a Bohemian as himself, and thus, quite in the way of his business, it chanced that, at a certain club whither he was then obliged to repair—not in the least of his own good-will—he ran across Mr. Posinby, who accosted him with effusion. He could not be blind to Mr. Posinby's mode of life; he could not shut his ears when that unfortunate wretch told him what he had lost, spoke about the odds, betted wildly, madly. He grew very intimate,

through some subtle sympathy, with this man, who was so poor a creature ; but he never learnt what he had done to bring him within the grip of the law, if the law liked to stretch out its arm and seize him.

Once, indeed, Mr. Posinby propounded the vague query whether he, Mr. Smith, believed Mr. Rodewald was the sort of chap a fellow might depend upon for getting him out of a devil of a mess ? But as Mr. Posinby was exceedingly drunk at the time, Mr. Smith did not care to pursue the question further, and simply acted the part of the good Samaritan by accompanying him to his hotel.

Nevertheless, he pondered over the mystery, till one afternoon he felt so exercised in spirit about the whole matter he exclaimed :

" D—— the Thames Valley, and everybody it contains ! ' a sort of Commination Service Mr. Smith would have felt a good deal surprised had it produced the smallest result.

Just at that moment a tap came to his outer door, and, without waiting even for the usual " Come in ! " it opened, and Mr. Rodewald entered.

He was almost breathless ; he had his hat off, and was mopping the perspiration from his forehead.

" Thank Heaven," he said, " I have found you ! Go down instantly to the ' Universal,' and tell Posinby he must not attempt to sleep at View Water to-night. Let him get off to France without a moment's delay. Tell him I am working for him heart and soul. *He will understand !* "

The cabman, who tore along the Strand in the direction of the " Universal," seemed to imagine life and death hung on the wheels of his hansom.

" Gone, sir, just gone to Waterloo," said the club porter, in answer to Mr. Smith.

" Waterloo Loop ! " cried Mr. Smith, running down the club steps ; adding, as he jumped into the vehicle, " drive like the—— ! "

Certainly, on the score of speed no fault could be found. The way that cab went down Parliament Street and across Westminster Bridge, and along York Road, and up the incline to the Loop, where it stopped with a bang enough to loosen every screw in its frame, Mr. Smith never forgot.

Flinging the man a royal fare, he rushed on to the platform.

"Thamesford—I haven't a ticket," he said, breathlessly to the policeman at the gate; and then, almost before he could think, he had sprung into the last compartment of a third-class smoking carriage, the door was banged, and the train off.

On they rushed through Vauxhall and Clapham Junction, with no stop till they came to Barnes; then on, and still on, across that lovely bit of the Thames at Richmond; past fair English homes, through orchards mellowing with summer fruit, through park and demesne, through wood and mead; and then sleepy Thamesford, with one porter and a lame station-master to greet passengers; and outside the station the View Water carriage, with the servants, in Posinby livery, to touch their hats to their master, and Mr. Smith standing very pale and erect on the platform, looking for Louis Posinby, whose end had come.

He was a handsome fellow still; and as he walked along with his pleasant face, his sunny smile, his merry brown eyes, his easy, confident walk, his extended hand, Mr. Smith's heart yearned over him.

"Well met!" exclaimed Mr. Posinby, with that winning, cordial manner Mr. Smith had never yet found different; "come and dine at View Water. Wherever you are going, come first to me; you must dine somewhere."

Twice Mr. Smith tried to answer, and twice the words he had rehearsed to himself so constantly on the way down stuck in his throat.

Even at last, it is doubtful whether he could have spoken them, had not Mr. Posinby himself assisted at their birth.

"What is the matter, man?" he said, "you look as if you had seen a ghost!" Then suddenly, "Did you come down here—for me?"

"Yes—Mr. Rodewald—"

"My God!" And they stood for a moment still and silent.

"You are not to go on to View Water," said Mr. Smith. "If you wait here I will get rid of the servants; then we can settle what had best be done."

All the passengers were already gone. The one porter had retired among his lamps to read the *Police News*; the

lame station-master was limping along his garden-paths, looking at his scarlet-runners, and a bed of feathery asparagus adorned with bright red berries and almost ripe for the destroying knife; engine-driver and stoker were shunting the train, which went no further, on to the up line of rails; and the guard was leisurely shaking a green flag, a demonstration of which it was exceedingly difficult to see the benefit in so desolate a spot; in the neighbouring stubble a pheasant was scolding his wife for keeping such late hours; over the whole landscape peace seemed to brood. The old church tower at Thamesford looked gray and worn against the soft evening sky. Nature was in one of her tenderest, loveliest moods, smiling with pensive sadness on her erring child, who should see her fair face, he had so often flouted, as it was at that moment never again for ever.

The whole scene cut Mr. Smith to his very soul. A great pity, a divine compassion troubled the wells of his heart, and stirred up everything that was best in his nature.

Side by side he and Mr. Posinby walked slowly along a country lane leading inland from the station; then, after a short time, returning alone to the platform, he studied the bills of the South-Western main line, jotting down in pencil some memoranda concerning the trains from Reedbourne, as he mastered the contents of the time-table.

"Yes, that is your plan," he said, when he rejoined Mr. Posinby; "you have plenty of time and to spare to catch the next train from Reedbourne to the Junction, and you can wait there till the Southampton express picks you up; then, of course, it is all plain sailing—if *you must go!*"

"If I must go!" repeated Mr. Posinby, surprised by the tone no less than the words; "there is no choice in the matter."

It was a trying position, yet Mr. Smith could but confess this wretched sinner quit him like a man. Though about to flee from the justice he had outraged, the laws he had broken, there was no craven faltering in the steady gaze of those brown eyes, the mirth in which was quenched for ever; no quiver about his lips, though had he been dead they could not have been whiter; no cowardly skulking in his gait, or unseemly haste in his movements. No; he was one of those who, when the worst comes, can face it with a quiet dignity; who, though they have erred, and gone God

their Maker only knows how far, astray, are able, when the evil day of reckoning dawns, to accept their punishment with such grand composure, their guilt is almost forgotten in admiration of the manner in which they accept its penalty.

Swifter than any lightning-flash all this swept through Mr. Smith's mind, and then he answered,

"Remember, I know nothing of what all this means. I can only feel sure you are in trouble of some sort. Yet, ignorant as I am, I advise you to pause before you refuse to face it. If guilty, better endure the stripes than elect to go a wanderer over the earth like Cain, but without Cain's protecting mark on your forehead; if innocent, put your trust in God and the right, and God and His right will not deceive your trust."

"Why do you say this to me?" asked Mr. Posinby.

"Because I—I who speak to you—did not trust to God and His right, and have consequently paid a price I should not wish my worst enemy to have to count down coin by coin. I never wronged a man of sixpence, and yet the grain has been eaten out of all the best years of my life; because for the sake of those most dear to me I elected to bear the burden of a sin that was none of mine, to maintain silence about a shame I had not caused, the folds of which, nevertheless, have stifled all that could make existence worth possessing."

No description can give an adequate idea of the repressed passion with which these words were uttered. The agony of the years, the tale of the days which had come and gone, been got through somehow, been faced and vanquished, spoke in the voice so low and troubled; in the eyes, deep in the depths of which lay a terrible sorrow; in the rigid muscles, and the stern compulsion the man put upon himself as he uttered a warning, drawn from an experience so bitter, none, save The Almighty, knew how His creature had passed through the wild waves of its well-nigh overwhelming waters. For one brief second Mr. Posinby, looking at him, forgot the extremity of his own need, forgot everything, save a vague wonder at the trouble humanity can bear; then, in a full tide, his own difficulties flowed again over his heart, and he answered, "But I—it is different with me."

"Well, and if it be, face the worst. I don't care what that worst may be. See here, Mr. Posinby," and he touched the fashionably-cut coat, in one buttonhole of which a dainty flower had been, by some terrible irony, an hour previously jauntily placed, "if it's money—and I do not suppose it can be anything else—the matter, I feel quite sure, is not incapable of arrangement. What should it profit any one to lock you up, unless he thinks by so doing he would get what you owe him? Even as I speak, I feel a certainty coming over me that all you want is a business man to take the matter in hand. I don't care what you have done; short of murdering somebody, a person in your position, with a wealthy wife who adores him, ought to be able to make terms, and I am sure you could do it too."

Straight and steadily those handsome brown eyes, out of which all the merriment had faded, looked at Mr. Smith as if to read him through; then said Mr. Posinby, with slow distinctness,

"Spite of all Rodewald says, I believe you are a right good fellow, and I will think over your advice. Just now I am sure the best thing for me to do is to put the silver streak between harm and myself; then, if you will come to me across the Channel, we can talk matters over, and see whether anything is to be done. If not, I had better go over the herring pond. Anyhow, I promise you I will make a clean breast of it. I will begin at the beginning, and tell the wretched story through to the end. One word more, and then we will start. I know your time is your money, and—"

"I am not so poor," interrupted Mr. Smith, "but that I can afford to give my time, as you would give your money. Now we had better be moving."

Retracing the steps they had taken, they walked from the station to the Thames adown a road lined and shaded with trees—past old Queen Anne houses, with trim lawns and a wealth of flowers; past gardens, where the apples and pears hung golden on the boughs; across a foot-bridge, underneath which a stream, that in the winter inundated the parish, trickled slowly; past the old church tower and the graveyard, where lay those whose little day was over; past big pretentious mansions, where both men knew pretty young girls lived, who braided their hair and attired

themselves for conquest ; past cottages, where the poorest rooms fetched fabulous prices at that time of the year ; past inns, which had no good quality save being close upon the river ; past the sunny suburban residences of town-men, who, having bought a bit of land, had brought a City residence down from London and placed it in the midst of most incongruous surroundings ; past a back-water of the Thames, along a lane which, till quite recently, had been a mere cart-track, bordered with common-land, where tethered goats still browsed like lambs ; past a red-brick dwelling covered with creepers ; and then—the silvery Thames, with two swans sailing down stream to their ait near the bridge below ; the sun glistening on the water, the bulrushes standing tall against the opposite bank, willows dipping their branches in the river, a canoe and an outrigger going merrily down with the tide, and, from the Surrey side, the ferry-boat crossing slowly. A fair scene,—one to strike the fancy and live in the memory. It will be many a long day before Mr. Smith forgets that summer's evening, with the sun going down behind the Egham hills.

“ Good-bye.” It was Mr. Posinby who spoke.

“ God bless you ! ” answered Mr. Smith ; and they wrung hands in a lingering grasp more eloquent than words.

He was gone. They had said all they had to say, the boat was already two lengths from shore, but still Mr. Smith stood motionless. The river lay in the sun's bright beams calm as a golden lake. On tree and bush and grass and reed and floating lily-leaf there were the thousand tints of green which make the chief charm of that exquisite land. There was a solemn hush in the air. Behind the tower of Thamesford Church a dark cloud was coming up, which threw a weird shadow, rather to be felt than seen, across the further distance ; a solemn peace, like unto God's very own, seemed to brood over the landscape. And yet there, in mid-stream, sat one man, carrying his load of sin to a foreign land ; while the other, with his burden of care, remained on the strand to wave him a last adieu !

And now the boat's keel grated on the gravel, and the wanderer sprang to shore. Before he did so he turned, and, with head uncovered, as it had been since he took his place in the bows, waved his hand in farewell.

A gaunt arm was raised and returned the signal, and

then, but not till then, Mr. Smith set his face towards View Water, with part of a sentence, spoken almost unconsciously by the man who was gone, ringing in his ears—

“Let Mr. Rodewald say what he will—”

“Ay, ay, my friend,” he thought, “and what has been your little game here, I wonder?”

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR RODEWALD'S OPPORTUNITY.

No one could have been more surprised than the Rev. Lionel Grey, curate of Reedbourne, who had arrived in that parish only a short time before the great Mr. De Field, to hear himself described as the son of poor but honest parents; and yet such was the precise worldly condition of his father and mother.

That they thought themselves something very far different, and that, in their way, they held their heads high, does not prove much to the contrary; only the constant struggle which they maintained between fact and fancy made life somewhat harder for them than perhaps it need have been.

It was impossible for them to do this, that, and the other, “on account of their position;” they had to “consider their friends,” who certainly failed to consider them; and they did without a great many necessities in order to “keep up appearances.” Yet it was all only the old battle of gentility fought with utterly inadequate means. Neither son, nor father, nor grandfather had ever known what it was to be even fairly well off; but the shorter of money they all were, the more necessary it seemed to them to retain the traditions of somebody who had a great estate and a great name.

The father of the Rev. Lionel was the younger son of a younger son, whose parents had not much to leave even to their first-born. It is quite useless for any good purpose connected with this story to travel back further in the family annals. From a long way in the dim distance they traced their descent; but there was little left to prove they had

ever been of much account in the land. Still, it may be taken for granted they did come of a good family ; they said so themselves, and, as they were people who spoke the truth, no one thought of denying the fact. Mr. Grey senior was agent to some gentleman in the North, from whom he did not receive any magnificent salary. His employer failed to treat him exactly as an equal, and in no single way could it be considered his sons and daughters found the fight of existence a peculiarly pleasant warfare.

There was always somebody who was going to do wonders for Gerard, or Ralph, or Lal, and the rest of them, and who ultimately did nothing. Mr. Grey, the agent, was not a pushing person, and he resembled his sons in that he had not too many brains.

He was a weak, inoffensive, useless sort of person, and all his children took after him. The girls either went out as governesses, or married struggling men who continued to struggle. The sons emigrated, became Civil servants at low salaries, or entered some profession in which they never seemed to get on. Lionel took orders, because a friend of his father's promised to give the young fellow a living when the then incumbent departed this world. There was not much perhaps to be said against his becoming a clergyman, but there was nothing to be said in favour of his choice, if it were a choice. He was not a bad man. He would have done his duty had he been ever able to see exactly what his duty happened to be. He married a girl, as poor as himself, for love ; and the same struggle waged under the paternal roof began in the house of the Reverend Lionel.

But he came, as has been said, of an honest stock, and he and his wife kept clear of debt, till in an evil hour, when sickness was in the house and nothing in their purse, news came to the village where they were then living that the incumbent, to whose clerical estate Mr. Grey felt sure he should succeed, had fallen down in a fit and could not recover.

The man's pecuniary need was very great, and his hopes seemed to him like certainties. *Now* there could be no harm in borrowing some money, and, through the intervention of a person who called himself a lawyer, the money was obtained. There chanced, however, to be one mistake

in the curate's calculation—the incumbent did not die ; he recovered, and for the first time in his life, Mr. Grey found himself in debt to an amount he saw no present means of paying. His creditor, however, did not press him then ; nay, rather, when he found he was removing to Reedbourne and a better salary, advanced him a further sum to pay the expenses of travelling and carriage of his goods. If Mr. Grey would let him have the interest regularly, he said, the principal might then remain till better times arrived. It was all very friendly and very nice, and gave the curate an idea the money-lending fraternity were a maligned and injured race of men. "He himself thought there was something very grand about the Jews." "He believed, even exiles and fugitives as they were, if only properly treated, they would be found quite the equals of many professing Christians." "He and Mr. Gideon had indulged in many long and profitable conversations on the subject of religion ; and he could only say, speaking from his own experience, no man could have treated another better than he had been treated by a person who, he understood, had been given a very bad name by those who really could know nothing about him."

Which was all very true, and made the first two years in Reedbourne pass as agreeably as was possible under the circumstances. He gave Mr. Gideon as much money as he could spare, and was not, perhaps, over-cautious about the nature of the documents to which he put his name. He knew nothing on earth of business ; he knew even less of the nature of the most ordinary commercial transactions than of theology. And so things went on smoothly till one day, when the patron—not the incumbent—of the living Mr. Grey was to have had died suddenly.

Then Mr. Gideon began to "want to know," and Mr. Grey did not know. He was not a man to tell any falsehoods about the matter ; but Mr. Gideon so tormented and confused him that his statements became, as that worthy gentleman insinuated, "not the same two days together."

Mr. Grey could not tell whether the new patron would ratify his predecessor's promise. He believed he had paid a considerable sum off the loan. Under any circumstances, Mr. Gideon would not have to wait long for the balance.

He was very much obliged for his kindness; and if he could only wait a little longer, he should have it all.

Mr. Gideon waited, accepting almost as a favour such small sums as Mr. Grey found he could pay. Then suddenly the incumbent died, and the curate found he was not to succeed to the vacant tithes, to the anise and cummin, or even a blade of grass.

It was at this period that Mr. Grey began to sound Mr. Cheverley's tenant about the powers of the law in certain hypothetical cases which he placed cautiously before that astute gentleman. In truth, he could not at first grasp the full horror of his own position. He had been going on paying and paying for years; and now he found he owed about three times as much as he originally borrowed! When he remonstrated his own signatures were produced. There were charges of all sorts—law-costs enough to make any man's hair stand on end; while Mr. Rodewald, in answer to his vague questions, instead of giving him even a ghost of comfort, threw out dark hints of the depth of wickedness which money-lenders could and would sound.

At length the inevitable hour struck. Mr. Gideon instructed his solicitor—a gentleman who also owned a Jewish name, but who, as far as religious belief was concerned, probably, to quote Sheridan's famous comparison, was "neither Jew nor Christian, like the blank leaf between the Old and New Testaments"—to write and request payment of the amount so long overdue.

The usual course of procedure ensued, during which period, amongst the daisies and the buttercups, then in their fullest bloom and beauty, Mr. Grey had a very bad time of it indeed.

He went to see Mr. Gideon and Mr. Gideon's solicitor. Mr. Gideon said he had put the affair in the hands of his solicitor, and could not now possibly interfere; the solicitor said he could do nothing without consulting his client; and so the unfortunate curate was bandied about from one to the other, till, with great difficulty, the lawyer was persuaded to accept seven pounds ten down, which had been carefully laid aside for the landlord, and wait a little longer.

Just about this time it occurred to Mr. Rivers, who was going away for his holiday, that he would try and do something for his subordinate.

Mr. Rivers himself had hopes of a very great preferment, in consequence of an old college friend of his having been installed as bishop of the diocese. If his expectations were realised, he thought he knew who would be appointed to Reedbourne; and he mentally worked back the whole matter, till he came to a very poor, retired, and most select parish he thought might suit poor Grey, who was *so very good*, but unfortunately *not* clever.

Wishing to make all things pleasant for everybody before he departed, the Rector mentioned his excellent intentions to Mr. Grey.

"Sorry though I should be to lose you," he said, "I feel, with those dear sweet children growing up, it is time you had a more settled home than I can insure you."

Then, after having, with many apologies, pressed a five-pound note into his curate's hand, for which he "thought Mrs. Grey, who was so *truly* a helpmeet, might find a use," Mr. Rivers, one fine Monday morning—when the larks were singing and the Marshal Niel roses scenting the air; when Reedbourne looked, as Horace Walpole writes concerning Strawberry Hill, as if set in enamelled meadows—set out thoroughly to enjoy his "parson's month," which, as all the world ought to know, means forty days.

A good many things were destined to happen within forty days; but, in blissful ignorance of the fact, Mr. Rivers took his seat in a first-class compartment, in company with a "chosen few" especially zealous in Church matters—De Field amongst the number—and enjoyed some very profitable and pleasant conversation with these saints on earth, till they reached Waterloo, when it became necessary—"so unfortunately," said the Rector—to part company.

By a later train Mr. Grey also proceeded to the great metropolis. He went to tell Mr. Gideon's solicitor he trusted, ere long, to be able to make some satisfactory arrangement concerning the payment of the claim which had already mounted to such gigantic proportions. With the fatuity which dogs the steps of men of his temperament, he explained the nature of the friendship which subsisted between his Rector and the new bishop. He said he felt no doubt he would "get something" shortly; all he trusted was no disagreeable proceedings on the part of Mr. Gideon might mar his chances of prosperity. The lawyer listened

to all he had to say, remarked he would place the whole thing before Mr. Gideon, received two guineas "on account of costs," and parted with the clergyman in the most friendly manner.

As he took his seat in the train for Reedbourne, Mr. Grey felt quite relieved and happy.

"I am so glad I went into the City to-day, Mary," he said.

"I wish you had never to go there again," returned Mary, who was a lady, if not of experience, at least of great decision. "Set of unprincipled wretches—taking even that two guineas from you!"

A week slipped by. The first Sunday of Mr. Rivers' absence came, and the morning duty was taken by the Hampsfield vicar, who informed the Reedbournians concerning many of St. Paul's sayings, and added several of his own the Apostle would have felt greatly amazed to hear propounded.

Mr. Grey, who had gone over to help the Hampsfield curate in the morning, preached at Reedbourne in the evening an even worse sermon than usual, full of platitudes and "once mores" and "agains," and silly anecdotes and far-fetched ideas—the fact being, a letter from the Rector had quite upset him, and muddled the few brains Nature found she could spare for the Reverend Lionel.

The Rector's epistle informed his curate that for the next Sunday he had been so fortunate as to secure the bishop's son-in-law to preach the usual annual sermon on behalf of the West Surrey Orphanage, which had its headquarters in a great building some three miles from Reedbourne. Ever since the charity had been established—once a year—or rather on one Sunday a year—the faithful at Reedbourne were from the pulpit reminded of its claims to their support; and the local paper never failed to give a long and impressive account of the religious services, and a list of the gentlemen who "kindly consented" to carry round the boxes (which were indeed extremely artistic, and so constructed that when once a coin was dropped in no one except those "duly qualified" could get it out again). Upon that occasion, also, a detachment of the girls was sent over in omnibuses; the centre aisle was given up to them; they heard all that was said in the way of endea-

vouring to wring money out of reluctant pockets for their benefit; some mammas wept as they looked at the stolid faces of the well-clad children; and many women, as they filed out, murmured "Poor things!"

It was not found always easy to secure a clerical luminary to preach the sermon, so Mr. Rivers' elation could only be considered natural.

"Mr. Bashby will read the service in the evening," he wrote; "and, though the bishop and he are quite of my opinion that the Dissenters give to the sermon an undue importance, still I should advise you to well consider your discourse. Mr. Bashby's report *may prove to you a matter of considerable consequence.*"

Mr. Grey felt quite eager for Monday morning to come, so that he might commence his preparation for the great field-day. Before he could shut himself in his study, however, he had a great deal to do: he had to call on the churchwardens; to speak to the organist; to mention the matter to several other persons; then to go to the village schools; then to take train to Hampsfield, and give orders for the printing of posters and circulars. He only got home in time for early dinner; and then he had to pay several visits in order to make sure flowers in sufficient quantity would be forthcoming. He had no horse, and in walking about the parish, time seemed to fly, so that it was quite six before he could ask his wife for the cup of tea he always found so refreshing. Poor Mr. Grey! The rich people in Reedbourne thought as little of him as he did of the little people. They were civil, courteous, and so forth; but they did not offer to send him home in their carriages, and insist on his staying for dinner, and press refreshments upon him, as they did on Mr. Rivers, who was not merely rector and tithe-taker, but had also received a very fine fortune with his wife.

Still, Mr. Grey was in excellent spirits.

"I shall have a nice quiet evening, Mary," he said, as he retired to his study to put on paper some of the great thoughts he had been labouring with as he paced the dusty Reedbourne roads and cut across field-paths, where what he saw reminded him that Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of the commonest flowers springing amongst the grass. Resting for a short time under the

welcome shade of a great Spanish chestnut-tree, he had taken out his pocket-Bible and found an appropriate text. His heart was "burning within him," and, had his powers been only equal to his will, he might have produced a really good discourse, supposing he were left to finish it in peace.

"I am going to commence my sermon, dear, for next Sunday," he said to his wife, repeating a fact with which she was before well acquainted. "I mentioned to you, I think, the text I meant to take."

"Yes, Lal; and, now there seems a probability of your being left in quiet for a little while, do as much of it as you can," urged Mrs. Grey, who was an energetic person, not much liked by servants or tradespeople or the poor, and, for that matter, indeed, not over-popular amongst her equals and superiors.

Probably they were as truly uninteresting a couple as could have been found in the *Clergy List* where it was an idea of Mrs. Grey's that the names of the wives and the number of children in the domestic quiver should be added to the information already vouchsafed.

Acting upon the brisk hint conveyed by his better half, the Rev. Lionel withdrew to his study, arranged his writing materials, and commenced the great sermon, which he hoped would "attract attention."

It was getting late. In the study—an exceedingly small and dark room at the rear of the cottage—Mr. Grey was thinking he must soon light his lamp, when his wife entered, and said,

"Lal, a Mr. Haffit has called, and wants particularly to see you. I told him you were very busy, and asked if he could not come round in the morning; but he said that would be inconvenient, and that if you could give him a moment he would not detain you longer."

"Haffit!" repeated Mr. Grey, pushing back his chair. "I don't know the name at all."

"No, dear; he has never been here before; he is not at all a nice-looking person, but, poor man, I suppose he can't help his appearance. Shall I tell Eve to send him in here? I was just hushing baby off in the parlour."

In that small house it was but a step from any one part to the other, and, accordingly, next moment Eve had shown "the gentleman in to master."

He was as good as his word, and did not stay long; indeed, the hall-door shut behind him as Mrs. Grey got her refractory baby upstairs. But he left plenty of food for reflection behind him, in the shape of a slip of paper, at which the curate stood staring in an access of misery too great for speech. He had never had a summons or a writ before in all his honest life, and he felt as if he had got a blow from which he could not recover.

There are pleasanter prospects to contemplate than utter ruin; but Mr. Grey had now to look at the most salient points in that dismal country. He sat down in the chair, from which he had risen to receive his visitor, holding in his hand the fatal piece of paper, thinking, with a sense of sickening faintness, over his position.

Before him lay the unfinished sermon he had intended should prove a masterpiece. With loathing he turned his eyes from it, and let them wander over the furniture of his room, every article in which seemed, from the knowledge it must soon cease to be his, to acquire a fictitious value. Poor enough, Heaven knows, his belongings would have appeared even to a man much less wealthy than De Field; and yet there was not a chair or table, not a faded curtain or threadbare carpet, but was dear to his heart. He knew the value of these things, if no one else was aware of it. So many dinnerless days were represented by that old-fashioned secrétaire, purchased whilst he was still a bachelor and in lodgings. A new top-coat he had deferred buying in order to secure the carpet, off which the pattern was now almost worn. The sofa and chairs had been purchased out of money gained by taking six weeks' hard duty in the closest and lowest part of the East End, while the thermometer stood steadily at ninety degrees in the shade. His wife's present to him of a pair of secondhand curtains, doubly dear because she had made her last year's bonnet "look as good as new" in order to make up the required amount. And so it was all through the cottage. Not an article in it but had been hardly paid for, and precious for that very reason. And now they would have to leave the house, and part with everything it contained.

Had he been a different man he would have thought, before yielding himself to such utter despair, if there were no possible means whereby deliverance might be com-

passed ; but then he was not a different man, only himself, the Rev. Lionel Grey, of whom nobody, except his wife and children, and his Maker who knew how hard he feebly tried to do his duty, thought very much. Even the old men and women in the parish despised him for his poverty, and, as Mr. De Field truly observed, he was a "poor muff ;" whilst Sir Burke Robinson tersely characterised his best discourses as "awful rot."

He owed, so said the writ—and he had no means of proving otherwise—a hundred and fifty-three pounds, and he had not a hundred and fifty-three shillings to pay it with ; so he knew the worst had come, and sat and contemplated ruin at his leisure.

"Lal dear," said his wife, putting her head inside the door, "who was that disreputable-looking person, and what did he want ?"

For answer her husband gave her the writ, and there ensued a dead silence.

"What can be done ?" she asked at last, and as she spoke her voice sounded hoarse and strained.

"Nothing," he replied.

"Nonsense, Lal ! no, I didn't mean that ;" and she kissed him pityingly. "What I meant was, we must not sit down with our hands folded, and lose everything without a struggle. There must be help somewhere, if we only knew where to look for it."

"It must come from God, then," he said ; "for I know no man who would give it."

"But think of all the charitable people there are in the world," she urged. "Think of all there are living close by us."

"Do you imagine one of them would help ?" he inquired. "They would give to the bells, or the organ, or the church, or the heathen, or the schools, but not to me," said Mr. Grey, with a bitterness foreign to his nature.

"Then their charity is hypocrisy !" cried Mrs. Grey, vehemently ; "but I do not believe it, Lal. I cannot. You ought to try some of them, at any rate. There is Mr. Frankford at Hampsfield, for instance. What would this sum be to him ?—nothing. Why, he gave five hundred pounds to the new church at Lolford ; and we could pay him back every penny, if we only had time to do it. O,

how I would pinch and save if he would only, only help us now ! Do go to him, Lal ; it is too late to-night ; but promise me that, first thing in the morning, before he leaves for town, you will see him."

"He is in Germany," answered Mr. Grey ; "and besides—"

"Besides what, dear ?"

"I have heard something lately which makes me fear he did not earn his money in a very honourable manner."

"At any rate, he spends it liberally," said Mrs. Grey, with a woman's curious logic.

Mr. Grey shook his head, but only objected, "He is not at home."

On the whole, perhaps, he did not feel sorry one possible benefactor was out of the running.

Glibly poor Mrs. Grey ran over the names of almost every likely and unlikely person, mentioning amongst others all the rich men at whose houses he had called that day, and finally referring to the Rector and the Hampstead vicar.

"No," said Mr. Grey at last ; "no, there is only one person in the parish whose advice even I should like to ask at such a juncture."

"And that is—"

"Mr. Rodewald ; and I can't go to him. I have never called, and you have never called. No, there is nothing to be done ; the worst has come, and we must face it with such courage as the consciousness of having committed no real wrong can give us."

He had fought so long, he had struggled, for one of his nature, so gallantly, that it might be the conviction he could do no more proved for the moment almost a relief. Those weary journeys to London ; the pleading to men he looked down upon from the eminence of his clerical position ; the scraping together of shillings and pounds, which when paid seemed to affect the debt no more than if he had dropped the money over Waterloo Bridge ; the sleepless nights, the anxious days—all, all were ended now. Let them take the furniture ; take the baby's cot, and the sofa in the drawing-room Mrs. Rivers had given his wife ; and as for afterwards—well, at that moment Mr. Grey was too worn and weary to think about what might come after.

wards. Beggary, the workhouse, starvation, death—all loomed dimly through the mists of his imagination ; but now he did not seem to realise or care what further misfortunes Fate might have in store.

Not so Mrs. Grey, who had the usual wifely trust in herself and distrust of her husband. (It is a strange thing, when one comes to consider it, that before marriage a woman always thinks the man of her choice can do anything, while after marriage she believes he can do nothing.) The masterly inactivity which might have floated Mr. Grey's feeble bark safely over this bar—since it is quite certain the last things Mr. Gideon wished to possess were those few poor assets by which the curate set such store—was repellent to a lady fond of bustling about the house and parish, scolding successive maids, accusing the tradespeople of short weight, and teaching the "lower orders"—who really, in their way, do manage to make both ends meet in an extraordinary manner—the "first principles" of domestic economy.

In utter despair she listened to her husband's objections to this scheme and the other ; then, making up her mind that "the beds should not be sold from under them without at least some effort on the part of somebody to avert such a catastrophe," she at last left Mr. Grey to his own sad company, and the contemplation of that pressing invitation from "Victoria, by the grace of God"—"whom we pray for every Sunday," thought the poor lady inconsequently ; "I wonder how *she* would like such things to happen to *her* !"—went out of the room, ran quietly upstairs, tied on her bonnet, and, slipping out of the back-door while nobody chanced to be about, made good speed to The Snuggery.

When Miss Lydney, with a little scoffing sneer, told Mr. Rodewald Mrs. Grey was in the drawing-room, and wished to see him, that gentleman knew the nature of her errand.

Chancing to be detained later than usual in town, he was accosted just outside Reedbourne Station by a shabby-looking man, slightly lame, and blind of one eye—an unattractive person, certainly, so far as externals were concerned—who asked if he could tell him where the Rev. Mr. Grey lived.

"Writ, for a ducat!" thought Mr. Rodewald, as he answered.

"You had better inquire from some one else."

"We're in such dreadful trouble!" began the lady, who, at sight of him, jumped up from the chair she had taken, "and my husband said there was no other person in the parish whose advice he valued but yours; and that he could not and would not intrude himself upon you, as we had never been properly acquainted; but I felt sure you would not think of such things at such a time; and so, without saying a word to him, I came here by myself. And, O dear, it was so dark; and I met a drunken man, and he shouted something to me; and then there was a cow loose on the road, and—"

"Won't you sit down?" interrupted Mr. Rodewald, at once taking the lady's feeble fluttering intellect in the grasp of his master-mind. "Now, tell me, please," he added, as she meekly obeyed him, "what has happened?"

What had happened did not take long to tell; but how the trouble had come about, she could no more explain than she might have done why her Lionel never, by any chance, wrote a decent sermon.

"I had better go back with you," at last suggested Mr. Rodewald, "and talk the matter over with your husband. Now the writ has been served, there is no time to be lost."

O, you *are* kind, you *are* good!" gushed unhappy Mrs. Grey. "I knew you would be sorry for us."

Mr. Rodewald, with great gravity of demeanour, but in the highest possible spirits, took his hat, opened the hall door, felt Mrs. Grey instinctively slip her hand through his strong arm for protection against possible drunken men and straying cattle and any other dangers which might crop up, and shortened his manly stride in order to accommodate his pace to her little, short, pottering, feminine steps.

Two such pieces of good fortune as had happened to him that day seldom fall to the lot of any man. It was listening to a most delightful piece of information concerning De Field which, indeed, detained him in town till long past his usual hour; and now, out of the whole of Reed-bourne, *he* was the person whom the curate's wife flew to for succour in their hour of need!

All things come to him who waits. He had waited two years, and now!

Heavens! in that time what had he *not* achieved?

Sorry for Mr. Grey's misfortunes? If Mrs. Grey had only known how that misfortune gladdened Mr. Rodewald's heart, she might have thought that, by some horrible mistake, she was walking through the night arm-in-arm with the Enemy of mankind!

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOW SHE CAME BACK TO ME.

"I MUST say, Mr. Cheverley, you are a greater simpleton even than I thought you!"

These words were addressed to me, Reuben Cheverley, by my tenant, Mr. Rodewald; and how was it possible for a man meek as Moses and unassuming as myself to answer them in kind? I could not, so simply bowed in acknowledgement.

"If you had agreed to my proposal," he went on, "I would have made that place the talk of the county."

"For your own benefit, Mr. Rodewald," I ventured to hint; after which we exchanged a few sentences unnecessary to chronicle here, and parted *not* on good terms.

After all, I suspect the Rodewalds and the Cheverleys of this world never do part on good terms.

There is as much antagonism between them—I say this, meaning no disparagement to the Rodewalds or praise to the Cheverleys—as between light and darkness, oil and water, mirth and sorrow.

"Our rupture did not seem to me a matter for regret—quite the contrary; there was that in my life at the time with which it would have been undesirable for Mr. Rodewald to become acquainted. He was a dangerous man I felt—more dangerous even as friend than enemy; and I had long determined that when his second year's tenancy of The Snuggery expired I would not renew his term.

He did not, however, express any desire to rent the place beyond the period referred to; what he wished was

to buy, and made me such a ridiculous offer for the house and land I felt glad to be able to refuse his offer as absurd. He would have advanced the price a little, but I declined to enter into negotiations with him at all. I said I did not mean to sell the place, and that no money he could offer would tempt me to do so.

Then he made a bid for Holway's old home, where, indeed, the conversation took place. "You can't live in both houses, you know," he remarked. "Come, now, what will you take for this?"

Once again his offer was declined, and he said,

"Well, what you, without chick or child, or wife or soul belonging to you except that niece you shipped off with Holway to Australia, can want with a house at all baffles me. That any man should live alone in a spot like this, with only a housekeeper for company! and, excuse me, Cheverley, but you certainly do manage to pick out the very ugliest old women for housekeepers any one ever beheld."

"Surely, Mr. Rodewald, the personal appearance of my servants is no affair of yours!" I said a little irritably.

"Of course not—only you might as well have something not absolutely unpleasant to look at, might not you? But that is not the question now on the carpet. Tell me the price you want for The Snuggery, and I'll see if it be possible for me, with common justice to myself, to meet you in the matter."

It was then that I repeated, with a decision of manner and diction foreign to my nature, that I did not mean to sell The Snuggery at all.

After the sharp passage of arms which ensued when Mr. Rodewald found I was not to be moved from my purpose, he went away in high dudgeon. At that moment, had I been Holway and in his power, it would have fared ill with me and mine; but I was not Holway, only Reuben Cheverley, a greater simpleton, said my visitor, even than he had previously supposed.

Well, in the beginning of this story I gave the courteous reader fair warning there was very little in me, and why, therefore, should there be anything amazing in the fact that Mr. Rodewald's opinion tallied with my own? Let that pass for the present, while I tell all the strange events

which have been crowded into my life since last I laid down my pen.

The point at which I did so was the precise moment when Mr. Smith advised me to put my too affectionate niece under the care of Mrs. Holway. Quite as a temporary measure his suggestion was adopted; but no long time passed ere Bessie came to me begging and praying to be allowed to go to Australia with her new friends.

She called me her dear, darling uncle; she said she knew she had been a trouble to me; but books such as I liked—"dry, heavy, ugly volumes, dreadfully clever and stupid"—were things she never could take to. She was persuaded life in Australia would exactly suit her. She felt she could be happy as the day was long with those sweet children. Already she had got so fond of Mrs. Holway, I "couldn't think." She needed a complete change after the cruel, cruel way Richard had treated her. Everybody said how thin and bad she looked. A sea-voyage was the best thing in the world, she had always heard, for any one with a tendency to consumption. She wanted to go away to some place where she should never by any chance meet one of those unkind, wretched, deceitful Dodmans again. O! I couldn't ever imagine what a bad unprincipled set they were. She wished she had never known one of them." And so on, almost *ad infinitum*.

"That is the turn I hoped she might take when I recommended you to send her to the Holways," said Mr. Smith, calmly, when I told him what had occurred. "There are some persons who ought to emigrate, and your niece is one of them."

Holway was, as I thought, needlessly explicit about the matter.

"She thinks she'll get married the minute she steps ashore," he said, "and it is very likely she may find a husband—out there." In answer to which remark I answered that was precisely what I feared.

"Supposing some scamp out there got hold of the girl and ill-treated her," I said; "I can't help her with thousands of miles of water stretching between us."

"Make your mind quite easy on that point," Holway replied; "I'll see to her. There shall be no false pretences about money. I'll let it be clearly understood she has not

a halfpenny of her own. Best allow her to chance it with us. You'll never have a day's peace with her as long as she stays in England."

Thus it was that, one miserable day in January, I found myself at Gravesend, going out to the vessel selected to bear Holway and his fortunes to a brighter shore, in order to bid Bessie good-bye and God-speed.

To my amazement, I found Mr. Dodman and Maggie on board. They also, Mr. Dodman informed me, had come down to say "ta-ta to the poor lonely little soul."

"It *is* a forlorn, desolate sort of undertaking," he proceeded; "candidly, now, isn't it?"

"The choice is her own," I answered, coldly, for indeed the very sight of the Dodmans excited my anger against Bessie's persistent and unnecessary dissimulation.

"Ah, Hobson's!" observed Mr. Dodman, with a nasty laugh, turning on his heel.

But he was good enough ere long to hold out the right hand of friendship. While his daughter was saying to Bessie, "I could not let you vanish out of my sight, perhaps for ever, without one more fond kiss;" and, "I only wish I was going with you;" and, "Remember never to send for me unless you want me to take you at your word, for I should start by the very next vessel"—till Mr. Dodman, after wiping his watery eyes with a torn handkerchief, and muttering in a loud aside, "It was affecting, devilish——if it wasn't!" took me to one side, and conjectured, in a husky whisper, I hadn't half-a-sovereign about me.

"Because," he added, "though, if I was differently situated, nothing could induce me to speak of such a matter, still, coming down here and going back again, and a trifle Maggie bought, so that our dear little Rosy might not feel she was forsaken and forgotten by everybody, will make a long hole in a sovereign—ay, in two. Not that I should grudge that, or twenty pounds if I had it. The sight of those two young creatures would touch a heart of stone! We were young ourselves once, Mr. Cheverley, we were, little as anybody might think it to look at us now—*young and tender—and—soft—*" and Mr. Dodman began to weep again.

Putting two sovereigns—the sum at which Maggie's papa modestly estimated travelling expenses, and a silver

thimble, which, with a perhaps unconscious irony, Miss Dodman had selected as an appropriate parting gift to my niece—in Mr. Dodman's ready hand, I turned to Holway and talked to him, till, just before the time came for leaving the vessel, my niece bethought her she ought to spare a moment to her "kind precious uncle."

I was trying to speak some few words of hope, encouragement, affection, and earnest warning, when Mr. Dodman seized me by the arm, and crying,

"We must not let you be carried off too!" mercifully cut short the farewell between Bessie and myself. The last I saw of her she was straining Miss Dodman in a rapturous embrace, so close and so long, darling Maggie had scarcely time to follow us ere the ship was under weigh.

Much waving of handkerchiefs and kissing of hands ensued; but, after all, at a short distance one handkerchief is very much like another; and when hundreds of kisses are being wafted, it is difficult to tell which is which.

At the Gravesend Station I happily managed to escape from Mr. and Miss Dodman, and, hailing a hansom when the train arrived at London Bridge, eluded all chance of further collision with them.

As I walked from Leytonstone Station home—for, although workmen were in the house, I had gone to live at Holway's farm—my thoughts were none of the pleasantest. Again and again I ungratefully recurred to the old question, "What had Mr. Amiott's legacy done for me?"

I felt more lonely and less satisfied than in the former time of hard work and small salary. My money had enabled me to do something for other people; but I wanted something for myself.

"It can't buy love," I sadly reflected; "in my own case, not even the semblance of love."

Truth is, my heart felt sore at thought of Bessie. I had done much for the girl, and yet, even in the moment of parting, her tears, her looks, her caresses, were for "that deceitful Maggie," and not for me.

No, it was quite true what Mr. Granton said, money could do very little. Ingrate that I was, I thought it had done *nothing* for me.

I passed through the gate, against the top bar of which Holway had leaned that March night when first I bent my

steps to his house—that night now nearly three years ago—walked through the darkness up to the rustic porch, and was about to put my key in the lock, when the door opened slowly from within.

A light was burning in the small square hall ; but I could see no person, though I looked about me in astonishment.

"Guess who it is!" said a voice which thrilled every nerve in my body. Behind the door there was a gentle rustling, and a remembered figure glided swiftly into the light.

"Adelaide!" I cried, "*Adelaide!*" But already her arms were round my neck, and she was sobbing on my breast.

I do not know how the next few minutes passed. When I recovered my scattered senses she was taking my hat, helping me off with my coat, putting my umbrella in its place, leading me by the hand into the parlour, where near the fire lay something which appeared at first sight like a few pillows piled one above another on the carpet.

"Look!" she murmured, in the dear remembered tones of old, of the blissfully happy days of poverty and companionship and struggle and confidence—"look!" and, turning down the corner of a soft fleecy shawl, she showed me her sleeping child. "Poor little man!" she said, "he is so tired;" and as she lifted her dear face up to look in mine, I saw it was wet with tears.

Gently, with a touch of down, she replaced the shawl, and then stood for a minute still and silent, weeping quietly, but as if her heart were breaking.

"I came to *you*," she whispered at last, putting out her hand, which I clasped in both of mine.

Yes, this was her home-coming! Man proposes. I had bought The Snuggery and decked it out for her! I had set it round with all the flowers she loved, and forgotten no single thing in which her heart delighted; I had waited there for one who never came; listened for footsteps that never sounded in my ears; pictured her rapture at sight of the daisy-spangled meads, the meadows a sheet of golden buttercups—deep yellow contrasting with richest green. I had dreamed that she walked with me beside winding rivers and rustling reeds; that we stopped to hearken to the aspens' ceaseless murmur; that her fingers strayed

over the keys of the piano; that, in the twilight, her voice floated in waves of melody through the open windows, and, like some angel visitant, wandered mysteriously through the silence of the tranquil summer night. In my fancy, no adjunct of simple grace, beauty, refinement, was lacking to greet her return; and behold the reality—Holway's house, almost as he had left it; Holway's poor worn furniture, and the "poverty look" not yet painted out!

Yet, if it had been Paradise, she could not have glanced round the room with eyes full of a quieter content, with a low-breathed sigh of deeper thankfulness,

"I bless the good God!" she said, softly. "Ah, He has been with me through deep, deep, waters!"

I knew it. Smith had told me what would happen some day; and that which he predicted was come to pass. Bit by bit, not in any regular sequence, not in the way of narration or complaint, I learned that her husband had married only for what she could make, and that pecuniarily he was disappointed.

"I never did get as much as others," she explained. "I had a want, they said. A great actress may manage with a not so extraordinary voice; but a voice needs more than its own oneness, so they tell me. Then, as you know, even my voice began to fail—poor useless voice; that could not bear the trouble its owner had brought-upon herself. Do you know," she asked after a longer term of silence than usual, "why I came to you?"

I raised my head and looked at her as I said,

"I hope because you felt earth held for you no truer friend."

"Partly; but that was not quite all. I did once have thought of returning to mine old home; but I said no, there is but one in all this wild desolate world who will speak to me no hard word against the father of my child."

"You did me but simple justice, Adelaide," I answered.

"And I loved him so once; and though that is all gone and past, like the now dead roses of the last year's June—like the foolish hopes I hoped, and the bright dreams I had dreamt in those happy, happy days when we were so poor, you and I together—still, we cannot forget—*ach!* no, we cannot forget!"

I made no reply. None was needed. If there had been I could not have spoken it.

"I never meant to marry," she went on, in tones so soft and low that, but for the utter stillness in which we sat, I must have failed to catch many of her words—"at least, not for long, long years. I had work to do, which I did intend to complete; but *he* came, and my silly heart went fluttering to him. Ah, me! It was hard, too," she added, after a moment's pause; "for I did not marry him because he was rich or noble. I knew he had little money. I did not care for his title; but he was my fate—my love; so gay, so handsome. Did you ever—you—see a man handsomer?"

I was sitting, shading my eyes from the light with my hand, and answered, without moving my position:

"I never did."

"And he agreed to let me go on singing till the future of my dear ones was assured; 'and then,' said he, 'I shall want you all to myself, and we will go and live in some quiet place where my small income will suffice for our few wants.' I knew a villa set high above a lake, in which I thought we should be as happy as the day was long. Ah, with what sad tired eyes we come to look at the brightest pictures hung in the gallery of memory! Courtship is one thing, and marriage another! And thus, dear friend, after all the so great things I was to do, the fortune I was to make, I am come back to you, like—what is it you funnily say in England?—one bad shilling, with no voice, no money, no anything, except a whole peck of trouble."

She slipped from her chair, and sank on her knees by my side as she finished her sentence, at the same time drawing my sheltering hand from its position, and bowing her head upon it. I felt her warm lips touch my fingers, her hot tears dropping slowly one by one; and, for an instant, though I tried to speak and move, I could do neither. Then compelling her to rise, I forced myself to say:

"Where, in trouble, should a child so naturally seek shelter as under its father's roof. To whom should you, my daughter, come, save home to me?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MR. SMITH DECLINES.

THAT was the secret my life held when Mr. Rodewald came wanting to buy The Snuggery ; and I felt glad to see him depart, and to know he had not caught even a passing glimpse of mother and child.

It was a long, cold, dreary winter we had to pass through, ere we emerged into a late ungenial spring. Down in the heart of the Thames Valley, as in the Midlands, the water had swept in all directions over the low-lying country bordering the rivers. Smith told me the spectacle of the submerged Surrey and Middlesex shores was one worth seeing.

"If it could only be brought into the Strand and exhibited at a guinea a-head, all London would flock to view it," he said. So one day I ran down to Reedbourne, and, walking over to Thamesford, stood on the bridge spanning the river, from whence I obtained a view of an expanse of water which struck me as at once grand, terrible, and desolate. How I longed to take Adelaide to behold a sight so marvellous and so uncommon ! But the risk was greater than it seemed prudent to run.

At Leytonstone she immediately settled down into the quiet humdrum life of the farm, as though the years of her fame and her success had never been.

"Ah," she said, once pointing to her child ; "if it were not for him we might think it all a bad dream."

What was there now my poor home lacked ? What was there which could add to my comfort, please my eye, soothe my heart, that most womanly woman ever forgot ?

And yet I was utterly miserable—wretched in the house, more wretched out of it—feeling, when I was with her, the position false and anomalous, and dreading, during the time I spent away, to hear, on my return, her husband had discovered her retreat, and that the publicity and the revelations her tender nature dreaded would have to be faced, unless she consented to return to the cruel servitude, the

hard bondage, from which, broken in health, and cowed in mind, and humiliated in spirit, she had fled.

Without asking his advice on the subject which lay so near my heart, I one day ventured to indicate to Smith something of the trouble now perplexing me.

He had changed a little since we paced the Calais sands together; grown irritable, and at times seemed almost morose. He was working very hard, far too hard for mind or body long to bear the strain uninjured; but, with that manner which was new to him—new, at least, to my experience—he resented the remonstrances I ventured to make, and, generally, when I expostulated, answered with some scoffing jest or bitter retort. He turned his worst side out to me during the whole of the early part of that year; and now, though the primroses were dotting copse and bank and glade in Epping Forest, though the elms were clothing themselves in divinest green, though high over the Lea marshes the larks were singing at the very gates of heaven, he gave no answering smile to Nature, looking her fairest and freshest and best—nay, rather, he gazed on the feast she had prepared so royally, to which she bade all sorts and conditions of men welcome, with sad eyes, and a haggard face, and the abstracted mien of one who could not care for beauty or sweetness, because all beauty and all sweetness had departed from out his life.

Nevertheless, I knew the man was not altered at heart; that, underneath an exterior at times harsh and rugged, he hid a great soul; and so I finally opened my mind to him, and said it was a difficult position, and I did not well know exactly what I ought to do.

“Do?” he repeated. “Why, nothing, to be sure, except drift, and see where the course of events lands you. There are times in life when we cannot in the least tell how we should act, or where we should go; and it is then the wisest plan to commit ourselves to the stream of circumstances, and go with the current. For the rest,” he added, with a short laugh, “Leytonstone is not Paris, or Mrs. Arounheim the baroness of that name, or a weary voiceless woman the beautiful singer Adelaide Lemberg. You are back in Bohemia, my friend; you are outside the pale of Madame and the Misses Grundy. Make the most of the position while it lasts; for sooner or later he will find where she is,

and then—" He did not finish his sentence in words, but ended it with an expressive gesture.

And that was his advice—catch happiness on the wing, or, rather, fly through the ether with it. But I could not wholly adopt the suggestion. If we were in Bohemia, I had lived out of that easy pleasant land of liberty, and felt there would be extreme difficulty in dropping once again into its primitive usages. As for Adelaide, I did not know what she was thinking about; till one splendid July morning, when she asked me to walk with her somewhere—anywhere, "a long, good way from home."

I put on my hat, and we went out together, through Leytonstone, past the Green Man, across to the gates then giving on Wanstead Park, round the lake with which the story of a hushed-up tragedy is associated, beyond the church so oddly placed, skirting the cottage set about with such rhododendron-trees as I have seen growing in no other place out on the great terraces which were a grand beauty of that house, described by a historian of the eighteenth century as "one of the noblest, not only near London, but in the kingdom."

It was two hundred and sixty feet in length and seventy in depth, and when we walked over its site not one stone was left upon another!

I told Adelaide as much of the whispered story as will ever now be known, while we made our way to a point from which we could look down on the Thames, and see the blue hills of Kent rising on the opposite shore. We might have been the only man and woman in the world, so great was the solitude around. No "vast wilderness" ever seemed more destitute of inhabitants. Had thousands of miles stretched between us and London, the loneliness of the scene and the time had not been greater.

"Is this what you want, Adelaide?" I asked at last; and, she answered,

"Yes."

I looked at her in wonder. What could she have brought me here to say? There was a light in her eyes and a colour in her cheeks which had been a stranger to both for many a day. With a pretty air of command she took me by the shoulder, and said,

"You must stand with your back to me for a moment, and then—"

She did not finish her sentence; but then—Heavens! Shall I ever forget it? There came through the silence of that still summer morning the wild bird-notes which first melted the ice of my long lonely life's winter, which woke my numbed heart to love and sorrow, which thrilled through me in the dingy Islington lodging-house, and taught me what my sleeping soul had lost!

Soft and low at first; then with a fuller, richer burst of melody; then a trickling rill of dropping notes, as if to try that each one was in perfect accord, not a false tone in a single flat or natural; then a rush of song, ending in a roulade, which I cannot describe otherwise than as a triumphant flourish, an absolute pæan of joy!

"Aren't you glad?" she said; "O, aren't you glad?" and, with every pulse in her body quivering and vibrating, she caught both my hands in hers, and held them fast.

And the green of the terraces and of the woods stretching away in the distance, the blue of the hills and the silver thread of the river, had not changed nor altered since she began!

"O, my dear," I answered, "I do not know!" for, as in a glass darkly, I beheld much trouble ahead. I saw Adelaide wanting to sing in public; I saw an irate husband claiming his wife; I saw a weak woman tossed on the wide world's billows; I saw the cottage where she had been, empty; and I knew now what had ailed me through the months gone by was too much happiness, an intensity of bliss no man born of woman had a right to believe would last. "Are *you* glad?" I asked. "Knowing what you know, remembering what you must remember, are you?"

"Yes," she replied, firmly, "yes; thankful. I did not think God would be so gracious to me. Since I found it was so, my life seems to have been one long psalm of gratitude to Him. O, my friend, never, never, never once has the bread of dependence, eaten under your roof, tasted bitter. To me it has been *most* sweet! But, *ach!* you would not that I should eat it for ever. And then there is the most of all, the child. It must be that for him I make—for mine own small son it shall be that now I can lay aside a *dot*. My little one! O, my little one! God has

given back to your mother His great gift of song, and that talent shall not be buried ; it must make many, many more."

"But, Adelaide," I urged, "you seem to forget—"

"Do I?" she interrupted. "O, do I, dear friend? Never, never once! But now I feel strong and well, and able to face what there may come to contend against. I shall give him half—what do you say?—of all that I make only;" and she stretched out her right hand. "He must come near me no more, never any more for ever!"

I did not answer her. I did not in the least know what to say.

"There must be," she went on, "lawyers, advocates—what you call them?—that can manage all of this. You will see the matter put right, will not you?" And then, in her ecstasy at having got back her voice, she thrilled out one long loud note, which seemed to pierce the heavens.

I cannot tell—I cannot even dimly conjecture—where her thoughts were travelling as we retraced our homeward way; but I know mine seemed launched on a troubled and shoreless sea of difficulty, danger, and doubt.

It seemed the most natural thing in all the world to inform Smith of this new complication; so, after our early dinner, which was, indeed, on that day a mere mockery of a meal, I took train for the City, and walked thence to New Inn. Arrived there, I found all the windows and doors of Mr. Smith's chambers set wide, and himself clad in an old dressing-gown, unshorn, half-dressed, lying back in a ragged armchair, ill and irritable, a sight for men and gods.

"Down in that cursed Thames Valley"—truth obliges me to accurately report his words—he said, "I was caught in a thunder-shower, and got wet to the skin; and, as a consequence, here am I, who can't afford to be out of harness for a day, laid up for a whole fortnight, and all because I must needs meddle in the affairs of a man whose affairs were nothing to me."

"He had been very ill," he said, "but was pulling through. Wouldn't I stay and talk to him for a while? No," in answer to a question, "talking did not hurt him; did him good. Mr. Moggan"—at this point I and a curious-looking person I found in the chambers exchanged bows—"had kindly looked him up. Mr. Moggan was

helping him to do his copy for the *Glowworm*. Perhaps I did not know he was on the *Glowworm*? Well, he was. He sent in something now and then, when he felt he detested the world sufficiently to be funny about it."

"Which happens fortunately to be very often," put in Mr. Moggan.

"We have just knocked off some decent things between us," went on Mr. Smith. "I can think, but I can't write. Queer, isn't it? No, Moggan, don't go. Some other superlatively good joke may occur to me, and Mr. Cheverley and I have no State affairs to talk over."

He was in one of his most curious, restless tempers, received the mildest suggestion with a rabid spirit of contradiction, told me flatly it was the best treatment in the world for a feverish cold to sit in a thorough draught, with his shirt-collar unbuttoned and chest exposed; and though at times actual physical weakness compelled him to stop in the middle of a sentence, he rattled on again after a moment's pause, saying all manner of ridiculous things, rapidly weaving garlands of strange thoughts and wild fancies, and then pulling them to pieces, blowing up mental soap bubbles, and laughing to see them burst, talking merely *pour parler*, making me feel sick, and sad, and sorry.

These, I found subsequently, were the wild reckless moods which induced Rodewald to believe he was given to periodical fits of drunkenness; and indeed, as I sat and listened, I could not myself help wondering whether the poor fellow was perfectly sober. Something in my face perhaps told him the thoughts which were passing through my mind, for he said, suddenly,

"You look as though you thought I had got the bit between my teeth, and bolted for the nearest madhouse. You don't like it? Well, let us change the play: what shall we talk about? Politics or parsons, love or law, choose your subject, and I'll discourse you sweetly. Moggan shall take down the conversation in shorthand; perhaps I might be able to get something a column for it. But hark! Here comes one with no uncertain or hesitating tread. Is it a person for me? Yes; and I know who that person is, too. Now, don't leave me, either of you, *remember*."

And next instant, after one sounding knock, and waiting for no answer to his summons, Mr. Rodewald, walking straight across the anteroom, appeared in the open doorway.

"Good-day," he said, nodding to Smith. Ah, Mr. Cheverley, this is an unexpected pleasure. I hope," he went on, turning again to Smith, "judging from the sound of laughter as I came up the stairs, I may conclude you are better."

"I am better, thank you," answered Mr. Smith, with a great and, when contrasted with his late demeanour, almost appalling gravity.

"Well enough to do that little piece of work I wrote to you about?"

Mr. Smith shook his head. "I can't undertake it," he said.

"Can't, or won't, which, eh?"

"Both. I can't and won't."

"I'd make it well worth your while. I have obliged you over and over again, and I think you might, by way of a change, oblige me. Why, the whole thing wouldn't take you a couple of hours."

"I am not going to try; once for all, it is of no use pressing me. I wouldn't write what you want if you offered a hundred pounds a line."

"Can you give me the name of any other gentleman of your profession more amenable to reason?"

"I cannot."

But for the urgent manner in which Mr. Smith had asked us to remain, I should certainly have taken my departure ere the conversation reached this point; but the tone in which the request had been made, as well as a repressed anger in Mr. Rodewald's face, prevented my moving. Mr. Moggan, however, did not seem comfortable or disposed to remain, for, rising, he slipped quietly away, just saying as he went,

"I'll look round again this evening, Smith."

But neither Mr. Smith nor Mr. Rodewald seemed to take much notice of his exit.

"I thought I had better come round and speak to you about the matter," proceeded Mr. Rodewald. "You altogether misapprehend what I want; I feel sure of that."

I need scarcely say I do not wish a word written to which the whole bench of bishops could take exception. You know, or at all events you ought to know, I am far more particular than you where such subjects are concerned. The way you often speak on sacred topics pains me—I can use no other word—and you may therefore feel very certain I should be the last man on earth to ask you to write anything even bordering on irreverence or profanity.”

“As I do not mean to write at all we need not pursue the question further.”

“You really, then, refuse to do me a great favour, which would cost you very little toil, and for which I am willing to pay handsomely?”

“I refuse to sell my pen to serve the purpose you have in your mind, whatever it may be,” answered Mr. Smith, looking straight at the other man. “Very sure am I it is neither to honour God nor serve one of His creatures you invoked the aid of what you are good enough to call ‘my literary talent and marvellous knowledge of the Scriptures.’ Do not let us pursue the subject further, Rodewald; I might chance to say that which had better be left unsaid, and you to hear things you would feel vexed afterwards to remember.”

Mr. Rodewald drew a long breath; then he said, “Am I to understand you distinctly decline to repay a very small part of the large debt of gratitude you owe me?”

“I distinctly decline to do the thing you ask.”

“Though I assure you, on my word of honour, I wish you to write nothing, the tendency of which is not most true and excellent?”

“Let a single word serve for all—*No!*”

Mr. Rodewald walked to the door; where he turned, and, standing as if framed in the opening, said slowly,

“You might have found it to your advantage to comply with my request. If you find cause for repentance hereafter don’t blame me;” then, without taking formal leave of either of us, he walked across the anteroom, out on to the broad landing, and went slowly and deliberately downstairs.

It was not till the sound of his footsteps died quite away that either of us spoke; then Smith said,

“Shut the outer door, will you?”

"What did he want you to do?" I asked, after obeying this direction.

"Write two sermons for him."

"Sermons!" I repeated, in astonishment.

"Yes, the devil quoting Scripture, and Rodewald willing to pay for a sound discourse, seem to me about on a par."

"What can he want two sermons for?"

"No good, you may be sure of that. I am glad Moggan went when he did, or Rodewald might have pressed him into the service."

"May I ask who Mr. Moggan is?"

"He is a very honest, respectable, good-natured, industrious little fellow, but, for all that, utterly destitute of literary morality. He is a mercenary willing to fight on any side—a barrister—perfectly indifferent for whom he holds a brief. He attends some place of worship regularly, I believe, but yet would have no objection to turn out an article proving everything came by chance, and that there is no God but matter. I have not the slightest reason to doubt his being a faithful and devoted husband to a lady who exactly answers to Byron's celebrated lines on Queen Charlotte; yet he would not hesitate to write a paper advocating free-love, or leasehold marriages, or a plurality of wives, or anything, any one might be disposed to pay for."

"O, Smith," I exclaimed, involuntarily, "how glad I should be to see you dissociated from all these people, and giving fair play to the genius you possess!"

I struck him suddenly, I suppose, in some sensitive part, for he paused a moment before replying "A lost life, my friend. Spilt milk there is no use crying over—and so, as I was saying," he went on hurriedly, evidently not wishing to give me the chance of pursuing the subject, "I am glad Moggan went when he did."

Having just seen from the window that estimable literary character and Mr. Rodewald saunter across the open space in New Inn, talking earnestly as they went, I made no comment on this last remark. In Smith's reckless and excited state no good could come of increasing his mental irritation. But before I left there was one question I did put to him:

"Can Rodewald injure you in any way? The expres-

sion of his face was not pleasant as he stood in the doorway."

"He may give a little trouble about money," was the reply, "but he has no other pull over me."

As I knew proffering Mr. John Smith pecuniary assistance to be a mere waste of time and words, I left that gentleman some half hour later a great deal calmer in mind, and more composed in manner, feeling myself much comforted by the assurance he gave me that Rodewald's visit had been as good as a tonic to him, and that he thought he would have a sleep.

CHAPTER XXXVII

REEDBOURNE IS ASTONISHED.

MORE than a fortnight later I was surprised, one Saturday morning while still at breakfast, by a very early visit from Mr. Smith.

"I thought I should catch you," he said, as he took the cup of tea I poured out for him. "Where's our refugee, though?" he asked, looking round the room where Adelaide was not.

"I have induced her to go to a little out-of-the-way seaside place in Essex, and take the child. He has been something ailing lately. I want to speak to you about her; but, first, tell me what has procured me the pleasure of seeing you at this unwonted hour?"

I thought at last he might have come about money, and that I would break the ice for him without needless delay.

"O, I wanted to tell you that, after all, my congratulations about Moggan being kept out of the way of temptation were premature. Rodewald got hold of him, or rather he got hold of Rodewald; they arranged terms. Moggan has written the sermons, and they are to be preached at Reedbourne to-morrow. The little beggar is as proud of them as he might be if he had completed a finer play than *Othello*. Actually he brought them round to my place last night, and

wanted to read them aloud ; but, I need scarcely add, I could not stand that.

“‘Sound doctrine!’ he said. (I only wish you could have heard the fellow.) ‘Good moral religious stuff. I did not think I should be able to do what I have done. Mr. Rodewald is delighted—handed over the money instantly. All I am afraid of is they’ll be spoiled in the delivery. I only wish with all my heart and soul I could preach them myself.’”

“And who is going to preach them?” I asked Smith, as he paused in his account of Mr. Moggan’s self-laudation.

“That is exactly what I wish to know, but what he could not tell me. He is to take a verbatim report ; and I want you, Cheverley, if you do not object, to run down to Reedbourne and find out what is going on. I have reasons for not wishing to be present myself, but I really do feel an amount of curiosity on the subject quite foreign to my nature.”

My first impulse was to refuse.

“Wouldn’t it look,” I urged, “as though I, too, were joined in the conspiracy?”

“Whosoever may be going to preach the sermons knows pretty well why he is going to preach them, and at what instance. I have been wondering all night if Rodewald has managed to get some acquaintance of his own to take the duty ; but conjecture is vain. Moggan says there is not a vice, or weakness, or folly of the rich laity and popular clergy he has failed to take notice of ; so I conclude, Rodewald, having at length got a chance of paying off a long list of outstanding scores in the neighbourhood, intends to make as much of it as he can. From what I can glean, he instructed Moggan to imply there was only one righteous rich man left in or about Reedbourne, and that if next year the floods rose and swept away the whole of the inhabitants, except Rodewald and a few humbler folk he might feel inclined to bid to The Snuggery, no great loss would ensue to the community at large.”

“What a strange notion altogether!”

“Isn’t it? For once Lazarus is going to have a good word said for him in Reedbourne Church ; his sores are going to be artistically displayed ; the crumbs from Dives’ table are to be held up to scorn and ridicule ; the very

dogs—Dives' dogs—are to come in for share of the condemnation. And the great beauty of it is that, I suppose, there never lived a man who felt a greater hatred and contempt for Lazarus than our friend Rodewald."

"Well," I said at last, "I do not much care for going; but still, like you, I do feel a curiosity about the matter, and so I will run down to-morrow to Reedbourne in time for morning service."

A Sabbath peace was all around as I strolled out of the little station, surrounded by pine woods, and made my way across the common.

When first I saw Reedbourne my eyes had not looked on anything especially grand or great or celebrated in the way of terrestrial beauty; but now, though the case chanced to be far different, as I paused and looked adown the sweep of country softly sloping to the still unseen Thames, I could but acknowledge my later judgment confirmed the truth of my earlier fancy, and that man need never desire to behold anything softer, fairer, lovelier than Reedbourne as it lay in the calm stillness of that summer's morning, with its dark woods, its emerald meadows, its gently meandering streams, its wealth of flowers, its gray church tower, its distant line of blue hills—all glinting and changing and melting and blending into one exquisitely beautiful and tenderly home-like landscape.

Yes, again I was in the very heart of the daisy and buttercup country, and, though I saw no daisies, and the buttercups had long been stacked with the meadow hay, still the charm of the fields where they grew stole over me once more. There were roses, too, in quantity, for that is a land where roses seem to bud and bloom well-nigh the whole year round. An exquisite spot, truly. Why had I ever suffered myself to be disenchanted with it? why could I not even then entertain the idea of returning to live there? why had I long previously-decided Holway's Farm was the "most suitable" for a person like myself? Pooh! Did I not perfectly comprehend the reason why I preferred to remain near London?

It still wanted ten minutes to eleven as I passed through the gate and entered the churchyard. Looking around, and recalling, as I did so, my first impressions of the place, impressions so utterly erroneous as to border on the ludi-

Crous, I beheld Moggan, like another Hervey, meditating among the tombs.

When he spied me he came forward and shook hands, as though we had known each other for years.

"Pretty place—pretty neighbourhood," he said, in true Cockney patronage of Nature. Modern man seems, indeed, to entertain the belief that God Almighty, having well-nigh exhausted His powers in making London and other large cities, invented Nature as a sort of after-thought for the benefit of the dwellers in great towns. Moggan looked on Reedbourne exactly as a sort of poorer Hampton Court or Rosherville Gardens ; as he expressed it, "a good sort of place for a man to come out for a blow."

"Well, Mr. Cheverley," he went on, "and if I may inquire, what has brought you down into these wilds?"

There was no use trying to beat about the bush, so I told the gentleman I would much rather not have met, I had come down to hear the sermon, of which, I understood, he felt so justly proud.

"Have you really, now!" he said. "Well, I am glad, for I don't mind confessing to you that I feel I have turned out a very decent bit of copy. I never did do anything of the sort before ; but if I could get hold of any dignitary of the Church willing to pay up as handsomely as Mr. Rodewald, I'd go in for divinity altogether. It *is* a queer start, though, isn't it?"

It was so queer that, aware no form of words could express my opinion of its exceeding strangeness, I maintained silence on the subject.

"What are you going to do with yourself after service?" asked Mr. Moggan, as I was turning to enter the church, where I certainly did not intend to occupy the same pew with him.

"I mean to take the first train to Waterloo."

"Don't do that," he entreated. "To begin with, there is no train till after three ; and I have ordered a bit of dinner to be ready at the Reedbourne Arms at two. Come and take share of what may be going, and wait and hear the second sermon. It is even better than the first."

"In for a penny, in for a pound," I thought. "Why should I not go to the Reedbourne Arms and dine with this individual, the like of whom I had never met before?"

Having come so far, I felt it would be agreeable to see the whole affair out.

"Are you not going to Mr. Rodewald's, then?" I asked.

"No, wasn't asked. Say you'll come, and then you can tell Smith how things went off."

"Well, I will come, thank you," I said.

Truly the downward descent is painfully easy! Fancy me—me, Reuben Cheverley, interesting myself in the doings of Mr. Rodewald, and consenting to take "pot-luck" with the venal Mr. Moggan!

With a quite fresh feeling of sin and guilt upon me, I walked into the sacred edifice, and, signifying to the verger, who would have put me into a prominent position, my modest desire for a more retired corner, he was graciously pleased to permit me to select a seat amongst the few poor persons who ever went to Reedbourne Church. They only did so, I had been given to understand to please the Rector, and get whatever might be going in the way of charity!

De Field, in my time, used to sing in the choir; but he had apparently abandoned his musical efforts, for he now sat, not in the chancel, but in a conspicuous place near the reading-desk with Mrs. De Field and some of his family. He was much stouter than in the days when I used to know something of him at the "Home and Foreign," and looked more bloated, braggart, and offensive than ever. Smith told me he had given largely to the church; and, in good truth, the sums Reedbourne Church managed to secure and swallow up could not be considered as other than remarkable. A cathedral well-nigh might have been built for the money spent in beautifying Mr. Rivers' hobby.

The church soon filled; the rank and wealth and youth and beauty of Reedbourne surged in waves of silk and lace and broadcloth and fine linen up the aisles. The latest fashions prevailed. Scent-bottles and prayer-books lay side by side on the narrow ledges inside the pews; fans were brought immediately into requisition—all was just as I remembered it of old. Save that the ladies' bonnets were of a different shape, and their dresses cut from a more recent pattern, I saw nothing changed.

The service proceeded as of yore. An old clergyman, with gray hair and a weak voice, read the prayers, and, a

good deal to my surprise, Mr. De Field read the lessons ; then, while the customary hymn before the sermon was being sung Mr. Grey—Mr. Grey and none other—ascended the low pulpit and sank down on his knees.

Could this have been anticipated by Mr. Rodewald ; From my corner I could just catch a glimpse of his face. I saw him smile—yes, certainly he smiled.

There was a dead silence in the congregation while Mr. Grey uttered the little formula in vogue at Reedbourne Church ; then ensued a strange sort of rustle, as if every person in the building was craning forward to look at the curate.

What could it mean ? I also craned forward myself to get a more uninterrupted view of the preacher, and saw he opened his sermon with trembling hands, and that the man was white to his lips.

Really the element of tragedy seemed to have walked up into the pulpit.

“ For John had said unto Herod, ‘ It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother’s wife.’ ”

This was the text, and, having given it out, Mr Grey’s nervousness seemed, to some extent, to vanish ; for he read the sermon straight on in a dull sort of monotone, something like a schoolboy repeating a lesson, or that in which a lad drone’s out exalted sentiments and pathetic passages in a printer’s office.

Rarely indeed had it fallen to my lot to listen to a much more telling discourse—never, I can truly say, to hear one worse delivered. On and on Mr. Grey went in an even, passionless voice, uttering the most scathing denunciations against sin in high places with a calm indifference which certainly struck me as extraordinary. Yet twice after the cannonade of hard words and scathing irony had been more than usually heavy he paused, and passed his handkerchief over his forehead. As the sermon proceeded a dim notion of the state of the case began to dawn on me. Rodewald had brought pressure to bear on the man to induce him to preach words which were none of his own choosing, and the text had a particular reference to some person in the congregation. Who could it be ? With quite a freshly-awakened interest I glanced over the sea of upturned faces ; but faces in society tell no tales, and at

Reedbourne Church a very select society indeed congregated each Sunday to idly repeat some very solemn truths concerning sin and sinners, to look askance with Christian scorn or envy at its neighbour's clothes, and survey its own with Christian complacency.

Some of the allusions I found no difficulty in following; they had been common talk and property even in my knowledge; but a scandal lives long in a small community more especially when there chance to be a few kindly disposed people ready to keep it alive.

"If you look into the world," said Mr. Grey, "you will see men as much distinguished by their vices as by the features of their face. Few men have many reigning vices at once; covetousness, well planted in the mind, will starve out all other passions; it will hardly suffer any other vice to live by it. The same may be observed of luxury and intemperance, and of lewdness and ambition. Where any of them flourish they take up the whole man. Other vices are admitted only accidentally, and at spare hours, or as they may be subservient to the main inclination. The covetous man condemns all other vices, and perversely defends his own; the voluptuous man abhors covetousness, deceit, and fraud, whilst he looks on his own pleasures as innocent and harmless, and yet thinks himself under no great condemnation for seducing the widow's daughter, which is her richest treasure; the ambitious man equally unjustly condemns both, and yet sees no reason to be displeased with himself for all the wild havoc which his ambition makes in the world;" and so on through the whole catalogue of sin, emphasised at intervals with circumstances and events of local occurrence which could not be mistaken, as well as references to the annexation of Naboth's vineyard, the greed of Gehazi, the punishment Samson brought on himself, the worldliness of Balaam, and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

But though the flames of the discourse played around all these various subjects, it was in that matter of the brother's wife the heat of the fire evidently lay. Never before, surely, was such a character depicted as that of the modern Herod. Men possessed of some special sin were, as Mr. Grey assured us, usually free of those other vices he condemned in his fellows; but the person who had married

unlawfully was the exception, if we were to believe the preacher, to this rule. There was no wickedness of which he might not be regarded as capable. He had made long prayers, he had robbed the widow, he had cheated the orphan, he had made religion a cloak for sin. Finally, as though the poor wretch had not been sufficiently scourged, St. Paul was pressed into the service.

"What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod? . . . For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed. . . . Know you not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out, therefore the old leaven."

And so, after a few recommendations as to the proper treatment of such a criminal, that reminded me, in their terse comprehensiveness, of the ban pronounced against the unfortunate jackdaw of Rheims, the sermon ended; the blessing, which, indeed, seemed a good deal out of place, was pronounced; and the amazed congregation were free to depart.

For myself, I took the earliest opportunity possible of leaving the church by a convenient side-door, and, choosing a field-path which led away from the village, strolled in quite an opposite direction from The Snuggery, till the hour came to join Mr. Moggan at the Reedbourne Arms.

When he appeared, which was not for a long time after that appointed, that gentleman proved not to be in the best of tempers. Mr. Rodewald, seizing upon him on the way to the lych-gate, had characterised the sermon as wanting in point, and stated that it fell "flat—quite flat;" whereupon Mr. Moggan said many things disparaging to Mr. Grey's powers of oratory, and remarked that Mr. Rodewald ought to have bargained for his own man to deliver the discourse as well as to write it.

"After this," finished Mr. Moggan, "he went down to the curate's, where, I believe, he held forth to that unfortunate individual in anything but a complimentary style."

"Held forth to Mr. Grey!" I repeated in surprise.

"So I hear. Grey's servant is cousin to the landlord's wife here; and when she came for the dinner beer, she said 'the furriner' had been 'going on shameful.' It seems there is an execution in the house, and Rodewald

promised to pay the man out if Grey would preach two sermons. Grey refused for a long time; but his wife overpersuaded him, and now he does not want to deliver the second discourse.

"'Just as you please,' answered Rodewald; 'but you might as well get rid of the bailiff, for you have already made the place too hot to hold you and De Field.'

"'What do you mean?' asked Mr. Grey.

"'You had better ask him how his brother's wife is, that's all,' said Rodewald."

"Good Heavens!" I exclaimed. "*Good Heavens!*"

"When he went there after the man was left in possession, and shown the warrant, Mr. Grey began lamenting that it was signed by Sir Burke Robinson.

"'Never mind,' said Rodewald, cheerfully; 'perhaps Sir Burke Robinson may have an execution in his own house one of these days.'

"I almost wish I had not said I would take the sermon down in shorthand again this evening. I begin to feel as if I should like to be out of the matter."

But after partaking of a much better dinner than, I candidly own, the appearance of the Reedbourne Arms and my own knowledge of the locality led me to expect, Mr. Moggan's views of the position became less gloomy. "At any rate," he said, "no one can blame *me*! I know nothing of De Field or De Anybody." And then he waxed facetious, and told me several of his experiences, many of which were, no doubt, instructive, and most of which were amusing.

Time passed in his company quickly enough, till at last, when, despite a faint remonstrance on his part, I had settled the bill, I remarked I would bid him good-evening, and take a stroll before proceeding to church.

As he wanted, I knew, to have a little more whiskey "cold without," which, he assured me, was the beverage he found he could work upon best and longest, I was permitted to depart alone; but just as I ended my pleasant *détour*, and reentered the main road through the village, from a field-path winding among meadows that sloped gently to the Reed, I beheld him coming along at full speed, swinging his hat in one hand and mopping his forehead with the other.

It was of no use trying further to elude his companionship ; and so, after he joined me, we walked soberly on together towards the church, preceded by a party of some half-dozen persons, in the midst of whom I recognised De Field.

He was, as usual, talking loudly and arrogantly ; and we were so near I could hear every word he spoke.

The sermon had evidently been under discussion.

"A fine discourse !" declared Mr. De Field. "Tell you what, now—candidly, I did not think Grey had it in him ; did you, Beverton ?"

What answer Beverton might have made, on this earth will never now be known ; for just as he turned to reply, a voice, as if from heaven, inquired, "*How's your brother's wife Deffield ?*"

At this question, put with the extremest solicitude, De Field started and looked round—so did we all, indeed, for that matter ; but there was not a human being within speaking distance, save his own party, myself, and Mr. Moggan, and, quite out in the middle of the road, a namby-pamby youth, who wore spectacles, and sang in the choir, and wore no whiskers or hair of any sort on his face—indeed, owned none to wear—and had walked about Reedbourne for years past with his mouth open, looking as if he were a perfect simpleton.

If Mr. De Field said anything after this, we did not hear it. Even Mr. Moggan was stricken into momentary silence, nudging me, however, with his elbow, and raising his eyebrows in a manner expressive of the greatest dismay. As we neared the church, he whispered in my ear, "I'll lose no time in getting to the station once the sermon is over ; there's a train I can catch."

I only nodded in reply. It had occurred to me also that I would get out of the daisy and buttercup country as soon after the service as possible.

Somewhat to my surprise, and I may add admiration, Mr. De Field again read the lessons. If there was a word of truth in the accusation launched against him, he must indeed have been possessed of a scarcely human courage to stand up among that congregation and read those useful moral lessons out of Holy Writ. Like one dazed, I listened to Mr. Grey, who, having apparently settled matters

with his own conscience, delivered Mr. Moggan's second sermon, maundering through a discourse which, to those who could read between the lines, was simply a denunciation of the ways and doings of the Reedbourne clergy. The text was, "But ye have despised the poor." And it is scarcely necessary to tell any one who has followed the course of this story so far, and is acquainted with the epistle in which these words are to be found, what Mr. Moggan and Mr. Rodewald between them had made of the subject.

The sermon proved to be precisely what Smith had indicated. Dives and Mrs. Dives and the little Diveses, and the stranger without Dives' gate, his ox, his ass, his man-servants and his maid-servants, his dogs, his horses, his carriages, his money, his purple and fine linen, were severally and collectively held up to condemnation; the clergy who lauded him for his subscriptions, who drank his wines, who ate his dinners, who were proud to cross his threshold, and say, when he came into their assembly, "Sit thou here in a good place," were denounced for respecting rich men and despising those of low estate.

That evening, if never before nor ever after, Lazarus had his innings in Reedbourne Church—all his sins were laid at the door of Dives (most unfairly, in my opinion, as I have always held, with Charles Lamb, that, "the genius of Poverty, hampered and straitened as it is, is not so barren of invention but it can trade upon the staple of its own vice"). How could he be provident when he saw the reckless extravagance of his so-called betters? Why should any one blame him for reeling home from his favourite tavern, when he saw the empty champagne and claret bottles which were cleared periodically out of Dives' back yard?

This is a sort of declamation of which a very little goes a long way; and I was beginning to feel dreadfully tired of the whole thing, when Mr. Grey suddenly came to an end, stopping short in a moment, after the fashion of one of those walking dolls wound up to go by clockwork, which, while stepping out quite briskly, is brought to an ignominious standstill by reason of the running down of its machinery.

Five minutes later I was on the common, stepping

briskly out too for the station, with the peace of the quiet night closing down upon me, the hush of the dark pines around, a thousand sweet scents wandering across my path as if anxious to bid me tenderly farewell, the lights of Reedbourne Station a little way ahead, and the rushing sound of the train distinctly audible as it swept round the curve from Hampsfield.

Every mile of our homeward journey seemed to take some portion of the weight off Mr. Moggan's spirits. He said nobody could blame him; that nobody knew who he was or where he lived; that the business had proved a profitable one; that he would be able, at any rate, to boast hereafter, two of his sermons had been preached to crowded congregations. Did I not think they were a couple of excellent discourses—now, candidly?

"Did you ever hear the story about Whately?" I asked, in reply. "He went one day to a London suburban church, and after service walked into the vestry, and congratulated the preacher on the 'capital sermon.' (A bow of flattered acknowledgment.) 'Rather flowery, though, in parts.' (The pleased smile froze, and the graceful attitude stiffened.) 'Spite of that, though, a capital sermon—I don't know that I ever wrote a better!'" "What do you mean, sir?" "I mean that the good parts were mine, and the flowery portions yours." "And," scornfully, "may I ask, who are you?" "O, I'm Richard Dublin!"

As I repeated this pleasing anecdote, the varying expressions on Moggan's face were a study. When I finished, he said,

"I suppose I am dull, but I really fail to see the appropriateness of your story."

"I think you do," I answered. "I know whence you drew your inspiration—the volume from which you copied out, I won't say passages, but whole pages. Luckily for you, my friend Mr. Rodewald has been engaged rather in the study of modern men than in the works of the old divines."

For a second Mr. Moggan's face fell, and he seemed to hesitate how to take my remark. Then, being a good-tempered as well as an audacious little fellow, he burst out laughing.

"Come," he cried, "I'll cap your story with another. A

certain divine—I won't tell you his name, because he is still living, and has a large following of silly women and weak-kneed men—achieved a great reputation merely by threading the great thoughts of great thinkers on a string of his own, and presenting the result as original. One Sunday a man who, like yourself, was well read in old theological books, took up his position just under the pulpit, and, as the reverend proceeded with his discourse, commented at intervals : 'That's Jeremy Taylor—that's Bishop Hooker—that's Bunyan—that's Knox—that's Dean Swift,' and so on, not offensively, but with just sufficient distinctness to be audible in his immediate neighbourhood. The parson stood fire for a long time ; but at last, leaning over the pulpit-cushion, he observed, in a voice tremulous with anger, 'If you persist, sir, in this unseemly course of interruption, I shall be compelled reluctantly to ask you to leave the church.' '*That's your own !*' said his tormentor, calmly looking up at him. What's this ? why, it's Vauxhall ! I get out here," added Mr. Moggan, speaking now on his own account. "Well, there's one thing I think you'll admit, Mr. Cheverley, namely, that there are few who could have got as much out of our old friend Sherlock as I did."

"Upon my word, I don't think there are," I answered ; after which we shook hands, and parted in the most amiable manner.

Next day, when I went to give Smith particulars of the proceedings at Reedbourne, I found him recklessly thrusting a few necessities into an old portmanteau.

"Read that," he said, before I could speak, and he thrust a telegram into my hand.

It was dated from a town in the remote part of France, and in the French language informed Mr. Smith that his friend Mr. Posinby, then extremely ill, begged him to come with all speed.

"So I'm off at once," explained Mr. Smith, with one foot planted on the seat of his chair, looking at me over the back.

"But you can't go this minute," I remonstrated. "There will be nothing across the Channel for a few hours yet. What's the good of your going down to Dover, and waiting about there for hours ? Stop for the mail, and, if you like, I'll go with you."

"Will you? Thank you, a thousand times."

We travelled as fast as we could, delaying nowhere, but rushing on through the night and greater part of the next day. With all, we were too late, however—for ought, that is to say, save just seeing the poor fellow before he breathed his last. He knew Smith, and smiled faintly; but the only intelligible word he spoke was :

"Sold!"

"Ay," said Smith, talking about this afterwards; "and I quite innocently helped to sell him. I don't believe there was the slightest reason why he ever should have left England at all."

He had not told me before about that hurried journey he made into the Thames Valley, at Rodewald's bidding, in order to send the man who lay so still and quiet, in a room near at hand, away to meet his death. The same thunder-storm which caught Smith soaked the fugitive through, and he never changed his saturated clothing till he reached the village where we found him, and of which, as we gathered, he retained some pleasant memory connected with his younger life. All these, at any rate, seem to know and love him there. He had not sickened amongst strangers. Plenty of tears were shed for the fate of the handsome generous "Milord," as they called him; "more, by far, I warrant," said Smith, bitterly, "than if he had died at View Water, with his silly wife and the fair Wickenden watching beside him."

He asked me what I thought Posinby had done, or whether I thought he had done anything, repeating Mr. Rodewald's remark about View Water and Somerset House.

"I do not imagine it was what Rodewald implied," I answered. "If it had been, he wouldn't have told you even as much as he did. Possibly he signed some man's name 'in mistake,' and that Rodewald knew it."

"And made him believe he was his greatest friend, whereas he was indeed selling him every day of his life."

We talked about Rodewald and the Thames Valley a great deal during that time, when we walked together, as in an unreal sort of dream, through the French vineyards. I had never, even on the Calais sands, come so near Smith before—I had never liked him so well. After all, these

stern hard workers are the people to know. In one year of their lives they store up enough of the honey of observation and experience to gladden the hearts of their fellows during the whole of their earthly pilgrimage. There was nothing my own life held I kept back from him; but vaguely, and with a sort of sad unrest, I felt there was much Smith was holding back from me.

After thinking the matter over for several hours, he telegraphed what had occurred to Rodewald. "And if I were you," he said to me, "I should leave before he could possibly reach here. *You* had better not be mixed up in any of his business."

So I slowly retraced my steps to England, pausing here and pausing there, not hurrying myself in the least, as I supposed Adelaide to be still at that dull watering-place on the eastern coast.

Judge, therefore, how astonished and shocked I felt when, on reaching Leytonstone, I saw her coming down to the gate to meet me, and heard her say,

"How good it is that you have come home! You will tell me what I ought to do. My little child will now soon be quite well again. Ah, he has been so bad, mine own very darling one!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MR. FRANKFORD MEETS HIS MATCH.

It was with a heavy heart that next morning I wended my way to Smith's chambers, to ask if he could give me the address of the best physician in London, where children's ailments were concerned. From a couple of letters awaiting my return, I knew he must have been back more than a fortnight. The first epistle told me how Mr. Rodewald had come to the distant French village, accompanied by Mrs. Posinby and Miss Wickenden; how there had been dreadful scenes, tears, hysterics, self-reproaches, lamentations, and "all the rest of it," as Smith irreverently and inartistically finished his sentence; how the "manager of affairs" had advised Mrs. Posinby to retire for the winter to

"an old-world German town," in comparison to which, finished Smith, a convent might be considered the very acme of liveliness—"a German town out of the beat of travellers, yet still accessible for Rodewald who would find it necessary often to run over and advise with Mrs. Posinby concerning the entangled state of her affairs. He tells me, Posinby, one way or another, has so managed matters she is left with a bare maintenance. It seems Posinby got her to sign papers recklessly, and that strong in the security of old Mr. Harridge's will, she believed she could do her income no permanent injury. Rodewald says she will have to pay for her misplaced confidence to the tune of about nine thousand five hundred a year for her life, all of which you can disbelieve if you like, or believe, should it please you better."

Number two stated "all that was mortal of Louis Posinby had been laid to rest (in the last place on earth, I am sure, Mr. Posinby, could he have spoken, would have said rest was likely to be found), in the Harridge vault, at Thamesford. Rodewald beat up the whole neighbourhood and the whole Harridge and Posinby connection for "mourning volunteers," so upon the whole we really did not muster badly. The day was lovely: from that most silent and romantic churchyard we could see the swans sailing down the river, and hear the lap-lap of the Thames as it sobbed in upon the landing-place hard by the rectory. If even a few present felt as I did, Posinby had some real mourners.

Though not naturally given to superstition, I felt there was what the lower orders call a "spell" growing on me, as regarded my visits to Smith's chambers. Rarely, of late, had I bent my steps thither without some curious circumstance resulting from, or attending upon, my doing so.

Certainly, however, as I argued with myself, I had seldom gone to New Inn save on errands of importance, or at a time when grave events were happening; and accordingly, a dreamer still, while I wended my westward way, I fell to musing whether facts induced instincts, or instincts facts.

"And you really are back at last!" It was Smith who spoke these words with no element of tragedy in them; Smith, very hard at work, seated at a table drawn close up under the window, who rose from among his papers and gave me most cordial greeting.

"And you are back also," I said, stupidly, as though I did not see the man standing in the small amount of flesh his spare frame carried, before my eyes.

"Ages ago—a fortnight at least; have knocked off a world of copy in the time; and I can now look Rodewald, or Rodewald's lawyer, when he crosses my humble threshold, undauntedly in the face."

I sat down, and told him what I came about; and he, with a deep sorrow and sympathy in his face, which suited its grave lines well, had just answered my question, and was telling me a pleasant anecdote of the man he felt sure would treat Adelaide's child with the greatest skill and tenderest consideration, when we heard some one ascending the stairs, and pausing at his door.

"Go into my bedroom," said Smith; "if it should be Rodewald, I don't want him to find you here. I have reasons," he added, hurriedly. And, thus instructed, I passed through the inner door, which, without a bang I dared not adventure, refused to latch.

It was not Rodewald, though. I grasped that fact as I immediately did another, namely, the impossibility, owing to the arrangement of the furniture in Smith's mite of a bedroom, of removing myself to any appreciable distance from the door of communication between the two rooms.

"Good morning!" said Smith to the new-comer, as if he were one with whom no possible secret would ever need to be discussed; and "Good morning!" answered the visitor, in a clear well-bred voice that had not a trace of the Rodewald rank about it.

Mr. Smith marshalled this fresh arrival across his room. "Pray be seated," he said; and the words sounded as if spoken in my ear, so close was the chair on which I sat, to the door which stood just ajar.

"I have called," began the gentleman possessed of the clear, cold, well-bred voice, "to ask you to be kind enough to give me a little information—"

"Any information I possess is quite at your service," answered Mr. Smith, fluently enough; and yet it seemed to me as he spoke his voice was not the voice of the man I had been talking to a minute previously.

"Thank you very much, I am sure; but, not to take an undue advantage, I may as well tell you it is quite possible

some of the questions I wish to put you may not desire to answer."

At this juncture I stole on feet of velvet to the other door hoping to find it open. It was locked; and there was no spot in all that room where I could avoid hearing the whole of the dialogue which followed.

"It is optional, I suppose, in that case," said Smith, with a short, nervous laugh, "whether I answer them or not?"

"Of course; but in case you decline to answer them, I shall draw my own conclusions."

"Let us get to business, then, at once," said Smith, for the moment, I thought, gruffly. "What is the nature of the information you seek from me?"

"I want to know first," said the other, "whether some eighteen years ago, you, John Smith Nugent, were married to Amy Wadford?"

"Before I answer that question," replied Mr. Smith, "I should like to know who advised you to ask it."

"You have answered my question by that inquiry," said the clear, cold, passionless voice. "Nevertheless, I can entertain no possible objection to tell you. I should probably never have asked it but for Mr. Rodewald."

I do not know why—for I really knew nothing of the circumstances of the case—but I waited for some deep-wrung curse, some terrible blasphemy to follow the utterance of that name. Nothing of the sort came, however; there only ensued a dead silence. Then said Mr. Smith,

"And the next question, Mr. Frankford?"

"Really, I do not know that there is any other. Fact is, till I came here this morning, I did not believe what I had heard was true."

"It is quite true," said Mr. Smith. "What are you going to do?"

"There is only one thing to do, of course."

"And that is—"

"Get a warrant out for bigamy."

Another dead silence, a silence even deeper than the first, broken at last by Smith.

"You won't do that," he said.

"I most decidedly shall."

"No, you won't. Why should you?"

"Why should I? Do you really suppose I," with an

emphasis on the word which meant scorn to some one else, "should continue to occupy so false a position for an hour longer than was inevitable? Candidly, as I tell you, I did not believe Rodewald; but now—"

"Mr. Frankford, I will be quite plain with you. Eighteen years ago I married Amy Wadford. Twelve months since, the thirty-first of this month, I met her again as your wife, and—"

"And between—and why did she leave you?" asked Mr. Frankford.

"Were you ever in love with her?" asked Mr. Smith.

"I suppose so, or I should not have married a woman of whose antecedents I knew literally nothing. All the more fool I, for marrying her, you may say."

"Have you any love left for her now?"

"Certainly not. The person who takes me in does so at his or her own peril; and she took me in completely."

"Well, yes, poor wretch!" said Mr. Smith, with an infinite pity; then he suddenly asked,

"How did Rodewald know?"

"I haven't the faintest idea; but he knows everything, I believe, about her you would try to conceal even now."

"Proceed with your questions, and then I will say what I have got to say."

"I want to learn from your lips, why and when she quitted your home, and what she was doing between that date and the time I met her."

"She left me, that is enough for you to know; as for your second question, I am unable to answer it. I lost sight of her completely for over two years; then I met her accidentally under circumstances which induced me to believe she must be badly off. I proposed to provide for her maintenance in some remote part of the country, but she refused to take any help from me. I never saw her again till that night at View Water."

"You are fencing with me," said Mr. Frankford. "You know perfectly well that when you met her again, at the expiration of those two years, she had sunk to the lowest depths a woman can."

"If you consider your information as exhaustively accurate, why do you come to me for more?"

"Because, as I tell you, I did not believe it. The whole

statement seemed to me incredible. Now, of course, there is only one thing to do, and I shall do it."

"And I say you shall not," declared the man I had known as John Smith.

"Who or what is there to prevent me?"

"I shall prevent you."

"I do not think you will."

"There is no need," began Smith, putting, as I could tell from his voice, a powerful restraint upon himself, "for us to discuss this business in bad blood. It is an awful matter for you, and for me—well, it has not been pleasant; but you have not injured me and I have not injured you; let us therefore talk the position over, like men of the world, and think what is best to be done."

"I know perfectly what I am going to do," answered Mr. Frankford; "and as to your not having injured me, I consider, the moment you knew who and what the person was calling herself my wife, you ought to have told me."

"Ought I?" repeated Smith, dreamily. "I have often wondered which way duty pointed, and I never could make up my mind. At any rate, if I did keep silence, it was not with the idea of benefitting myself or hurting you, so I hope I may speak to you freely, without any lurking suspicion that you regard me as your enemy."

"What have you got to say?" asked Mr. Frankford; his tone was not encouraging.

"I have got to say this: that when a great scandal can be avoided, it is never worth while to cause one. Why should you hound and persecute this unhappy sinner, who, I solemnly declare before God, I do not believe can discern right from wrong—who never understood or acknowledged any law, human or divine, save that of her own gratification—who morally I believe to have been born blind?"

"Are you mad?" said Mr. Frankford. "Do you suppose for one moment I should ever allow the same roof again to cover us—that I should not instantly free myself from such a woman?"

"No; I do not suppose anything of the sort. But what I did and do think is, you would rather the world remained in ignorance that your wife was in fact no wife, and that her antecedents would not bear investigation. Stop! don't

answer me, please, for a moment, till I have quite finished. You are a rich man, Mr. Frankford. Life, I doubt not, still holds many prizes you would desire to win ; at all events, life is not over for you. Well, you know what society is as well as I ; that, though it gloats over the details of a tragedy, it despises every one of the actors in it ; and if you are as sensible and worldly-wise a man as I take you to be, instead of making yourself and the unhappy woman, who has been known as Mrs. Frankford, the talk of the town, you will quietly separate from her, and leave the rest to time. You won't have to wait long for your release."

"What do you mean?"

"That she is dying ; that before another spring comes, you will be as free as the law could make you now, that there is no need for exposure, or gossip, or publicity. She has, I understand, gone away for the benefit of her health. There is one thing quite certain : she will never come back again unless you decide to bring her under the escort of a policeman."

"How do you know this?" asked Mr. Frankford.

"How do I know?" repeated Mr. Smith ; "because she came to me here. She sat where you are sitting, and prayed to me for life as she will never, I fear, pray to God for forgiveness. Merton, it seems, told her the truth plainly ; the great doctors pocketed their fees ; gave her some harmless prescriptions, and told her pleasant fables ; but she knew she was in danger, and so turned to me to save her."

"And you?" suggested Mr. Frankford.

"When she complained that I would not touch her hand or feel her pulse, I said, 'If you offered me for guerdon the years you have cursed ; if you returned to me, with its highest hopes fulfilled, the broken career you marred ; if you gave me perfected the "might have been" that can never, never be for me now, I could no more add a day to your existence than a cubit to my own stature. They are lying prophets who professed to be able to cure you ! I have but to look in your face to know the fiat has been pronounced, the doom gone forth. Make your peace, if it be possible, with God, to whom all things are possible ; for I swear to you, in your case, there is no hope of help for mind or body from man.'"

If Rodewald himself, sitting where I sat, had heard those

words spoken as they were, I think even he must have been touched; but apparently they produced not the slightest effect on Mr. Frankford.

"Did it not strike you," he asked, "as an unheard-of thing, for her to come on such an errand to *you*?"

"No; for I knew her; and she—well, in her extremity she remembered what men said of me in the days when I had still a future. She thought the wisdom of the College of Physicians folly in comparison to the knowledge of the man whose love she despised, whose heart she broke; in a word, she wanted something, and, believing I could give it to her, turned to me. She came for life, and I had to substitute death; and she went out of that door and down the stairs, and back to her home, knowing full surely her days were numbered, that the long dark story of sin, deceit, and selfishness was drawing swiftly to a close."

There was a moment's pause. "What will he say now?" I wondered; and memory, like a lightning flash, showed me a veiled figure I had once met, as I made my way up to Smith's chambers; yes, and that same morning he had said he was busy, and asked me to call again when next I chanced to be passing. Lord, what trouble, known alone to Thee, Thy creatures are often wrestling with, when we, their friends, are totally unaware of the struggle!

"To divest the whole matter of sentiment and verbiage"—it was Mr. Frankford who spoke—"what you want me to do is—let this matter remain in abeyance until Mrs. Nugent—shall we call her?—is good enough to solve the difficulty by dying."

I wish I could have seen Smith's face as he answered, "Yes."

"Then I distinctly decline to do anything of the sort. I have not yet been to my solicitors, but I shall go now and instruct them to do *at once* everything which may be necessary in such a case."

"You will?"

"Yes, this morning. In what position, may I ask you, do you suppose I should find myself at the end of a twelve-month, supposing Mrs. Nugent did *not* die? The whole suggestion is ridiculous!"

"That is a fear which need not trouble you. She is dying as fast as a woman of her temperament can die."

"I mean no imputation on your medical skill—which, however, I should imagine must have got somewhat rusted—or your truthfulness, which I have no sufficient reason to doubt, when I say I intend to put my own position on a sound footing, quite independent of the opinion of any man."

"O!" said Mr. Smith, and for a moment he said no more; then, as Mr. Frankford rose to go, he went on,

"There is a case mentioned in a book little read nowadays which seems to me peculiarly applicable to this matter. It commences with the words,

"'There was a certain rich man which had a steward.' Need I proceed, Mr. Frankford?"

"No, sir, you need not. If you adduced fifty parables to prove I ought to forgive the shameful and shameless deception which has been practised upon me, it would not shake my determination in the least. To end this maudlin, whether you are sincere or whether you are not, whether you are in league with this woman, as I begin to suspect, or whether you are not, she shall pay the penalty of her crime. Remember, I shall not punish her to revenge, but only to free myself."

"That is your last word, Mr. Frankford, is it?"

I knew Smith must have risen as he spoke. In fancy I could see him towering tall, erect, severe, above the man he addressed.

"Yes; I hoped you would have coöperated with me in a reasonable spirit; but as, for some reason best known to yourself, you incline to take the part of the woman who has injured you as well as me, I feel I had better obtain all the technical information I require elsewhere;" and, with this, he would have gone had Smith not stopped him by saying,

"A minute, Mr. Frankford; I won't detain you longer. You have stated your determination; now hear mine. If you persist in your resolution of sending a dying woman to gaol, the same paragraph which tells the world her sentence shall tell the antecedents of the man who condemns her to pass the few remaining days of her life in prison. Make no mistake about what I mean. I knew how you got your money before I ever saw your face. Rodewald who told you my secret unearthed yours and took me into his con-

fidence. Since then I have pursued the matter on my own account, and I swear to you the moment you proceed against the woman who is my wife, I will gibbet you in every paper published in England. You may think me a poor man, but no man is poor who has the press of Great Britain at his back. I have the press at my back. I am rich enough to retain counsel, and I will retain the best men at the Bar—the man with no scruples, and possessed of the bitterest, wittiest tongue. How about the George Jones, Mr. Frankford, which foundered off Newfoundland ; about the Albatross, which went down in the Bay of Biscay ; about—”

“I have the honour to wish you good morning,” interrupted Mr. Frankford, with the calmest politeness ; and I heard him cross the room and lobby, and close both doors behind him.

I waited a minute—in effect I waited many minutes—then I walked into Smith’s sitting-room. His arms were thrown out across the table, his hands were linked loosely together, and his face lay buried on the support thus formed.

“Smith,” I said, as he took no notice of my presence, “of course you know I have heard every word. Before I go I wish to tell you this sad, sad story shall remain locked in my soul as though it had never been spoken.”

He looked up. “Don’t go yet,” he entreated ; “I want to speak to you.”

So I waited—I don’t know how long ; and if I did, it would not much matter. I sat in the chair Mr. Frankford had vacated, and thought about a thousand things ; he sat in the chair he had occupied during the interview just ended, and took a cheerful survey, I doubt not, of what that eighteen years referred to had brought to him.

At length, however, when the passion or paroxysm was over, he spoke.

“I am glad you heard,” he said. “I have often wished to tell you, but I could not. Let me tell you now, or I shall never be able to do so hereafter—never. Don’t answer me, please ; don’t talk if you can help it. I am an Irishman ; I was born, reared, and bred in the black North ; I come of a good family ; but what remained of my father’s property was swept away through the Encum-

bered Estates' Court, and I always knew I should have to work for my living."

"Smith," I entreated, "tell me all this at some future time, or never, if you think well; but do not speak about your sorrow now—you are in no fit state of mind—"

He stopped me with an impatient gesture.

"It will do me good, I tell you. The floodgates are open; let the stream have its way. Where was I?—O, I was never much to look at. Not even the mother that bore me could say a word in favour of my looks; but I had something in me, and I meant to make a mark. Were not my parents proud of me! At home, I have no doubt, the prizes of my boyhood are all still kept in an old ebony cabinet that stands in the right-hand recess, beside the fireplace in the little drawing-room. Ah, me! ah, me!"

He paused for a moment; but I did not speak. I felt I could not break the thread of his narrative again.

"I chose the medical profession, and made rapid progress. While still quite a young man, the chance offered of coming to England, and I eagerly availed myself of it. The following summer I spent a month in Ireland; but I have never been there since. That is more than twenty years ago. My mother is dead. In all that time my poor father and I have not once seen each other—"

He rose, and, pouring some water into a tumbler, took a long deep draught ere he went on again.

"I drifted down from Lancashire into Somerset, and soon dropped into a splendid practice there. It was not good when I first got it, but the people took to, and circumstances favoured, me. No man of my worldly degree ever probably began life with fairer prospects. I liked the place, my work, my patients, my friends—for the gentry were very kind to me. After a short time I wrote home to say I could begin to show my gratitude for the unselfish love and devotion lavished so ungrudgingly upon my education and the preliminary expenses of my profession, and that I should, therefore, for the future remit quarterly a sum which added no doubt greatly to the comfort of my parents' lives. The sum was just half my then income. I mention this to help to explain my conduct later on.

"At a distance of some miles from my house there lived a poor curate, with two motherless daughters. He was ill,

and I attended him without charge. I don't think he was in the least degree thankful ; but for a smile from one of the girls I would have ridden twice as far any day. I knew she was not a wife for me, and I had no more thought or intention of marrying her than of buying some rare Old Master or delicate morsel of china. I always believed she would make some great match. Hers was the sort of beauty one feels entitles a woman to form a grand alliance. Look ;" and, unlocking a drawer, he took from out its wrappings a miniature painted on ivory, and placed it in my hand.

I could not repress an exclamation of surprise.

"Most beautiful !" I said. "And is this—"

"There is a 'she' in every man's life," answered Smith, "and that is the woman of mine—let me cover her fair false face from sight ! To make a long story short, the father died, and the sisters were left penniless. The elder took a situation ; but Amy was clearly too handsome for anything of the sort. Meantime, the prince, or earl, or millionaire had not come ; and there seemed no sign of his coming. I was the only ship in sight ; and so—she made believe she was fond of me, and the story of Delilah and Samson was repeated. The whole thing was sudden—the proposal, the marriage, the homecoming. I did not tell my parents what I had done. From the first, I suppose, I knew it was a mad foolish thing ; and, besides, they might have felt reluctant to take money from me when I was no longer single.

"Eighteen months went by. Amongst my patients was a rich bachelor called Ashley. He had always shown me marked favour, which increased after my marriage. I don't know what the trouble may have been his life held ; but at any rate he was fond of bright faces, and Amy kept ever a plentiful stock of smiles for out of doors. If she had been his daughter, he could not have been kinder to her. We were both free of his house ; and at last, when I advised him to winter abroad, he proposed we should accompany him, and offered, if I would consent, to 'make it worth my while.'

"I would never have consented to such a thing, but Amy gave me no peace about the matter ; and so at last it was arranged I should take a doctor I knew into partner-

ship, and, leaving the practice in his charge, go to France or elsewhere with Mr. Ashley. On the whole, I did not feel sorry at the chance of leaving home for a while, for I was greatly annoyed by the constant presence of a cousin of Amy's—a young lieutenant, who happened to be stationed at the nearest town. He was a poor empty-headed creature, with no single thing to recommend him except good looks; but Amy said he was 'very amusing,' and of course, as he was her relation, I could scarcely expect her to share my sentiments concerning him.

"People blamed me afterwards, declared I ought to have known; but upon my word, Cheverley, it seems to me the virtue which needs watching is scarcely worth keeping.

"Very often Mr. Ashley had large amounts of money in his house—occasionally as much as three or four thousand pounds—of which fact both Amy and I were well aware. I often remonstrated with him on the subject, frequently offering to bank the amount; but he still persisted in the practice, and, as I said before, we generally knew when he had such sums. Sometimes, indeed, he would ask Amy to lock a bundle of notes away for him in a small safe fixed into the wall of his library. All the partnership business was settled, and we were to leave in a fortnight, when one evening, on my return home after a hard day's work, I was met with the information, 'Missus would not be back for dinner.' She never came back at all; she was gone with her cousin. She had been more than usually sweet and affectionate when we parted; she had kissed me fondly. The last thing I saw, as I turned to take one last glance at the house, was a white, white hand waving in tender farewell."

As he spoke he stopped, as if he had been shot; the rush and hurry of old memories seemed to choke him, and it was a minute before he said:

"While I was battling with this trouble, I heard a large sum of money was missing out of Mr. Ashley's safe. At first I did not connect the two things; I was even dull enough to fail to understand the hints which people dropped on the subject. When he discovered his loss, he at once tried to stop payment of the notes, but found the whole of them, with the exception of one, value ten pounds, had

been changed at the Bank of England. Then that one note was advertised for, information received on the subject, the clue taken up and followed *till it was traced back to me*. I knew I had paid away a ten-pound note, and I remember wondering at the time how it came into my desk, where I felt confident I had left a five-pound note and five pounds in gold."

Once again he stopped, and I was on the point of entreating him to proceed no further, when he hurriedly resumed :

"I don't think Mr. Ashley would have been so hard upon me as he was, but for his solicitor and the nephew, who was to succeed to his property. It was just a toss-up whether they should give me in charge. I ought to have let them do so ; I ought to have stood my trial, allowed them to search for the woman who had left me and robbed him ; but I could not do it. I had loved Amy with my whole soul. There were my parents, whose heart I knew such a disgrace would break ; there was my worse than motherless child in her cradle ; and so I turned from the direct path, and sought safety where it offered.

"It was my partner who stood by me then. He found the money, the matter was hushed up ; I let my father think I had gone abroad ; I gave up my profession, and I went forth into the world, saddled with debt, nameless, penniless, hopeless.

"The tale of the years since then can be told in one word—WORK—ceaseless work. It took me some time before I could earn enough by my pen to do more than pay the interest on the loan, keep body and soul together, and remit the annual stipend to my parents. I passed through every stage, I think, of bitterness and despair the human heart can travel. But before the evil day when, my friend dying suddenly, the balance of the debt passed into other hands, I had exercised some of the demons which held possession of me."

He paused in his rapid, almost breathless, narrative, and, with lips sternly compressed and eyes fixed on the opposite wall, looked back upon that awful past he had lived through without help from man or love from woman—lived through, solitary in the midst of a mighty city, lonely, though surrounded by thousands of his struggling fellow-creatures.

Think of the ordeal he had endured, of the fire he had passed through and come out purified ! Yes, knowing him as I knew him afterwards, I can safely say, whatever there may originally have been in his nature of dross was purified in the flame of that fierce fiery furnace. In the struggle a lesser soul might have been lost ; as it was, a great soul grew greater, a strong heart stronger.

"Well," he said at last, "I think I have told you pretty nearly all—except this, that, after my friend's death, I had to pay unfair interest instead of fair, and that, in the course of the transactions which ensued, I drifted across Rodewald. He is as bad and dangerous a man, I now believe, as ever drew breath ; yet for one thing, I shall always owe him a debt of gratitude. He took me to his home—the children were little then, and they laid their tiny hands upon my stricken heart, which could have borne no heavier touch, and seemed to bring something of vitality back to it. There, Cheverley," he added, "I have done. I was an idiot. I always longed for love and friendship, and the prattle of children, and the songs of gladness, and the soft winning ways of women ; and God, in his infinite wisdom, decreed I should have none of them. Yet shall I murmur ? No : 'Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus ?' "

I rose. I knew, then, he wanted me to go ; and yet I felt I could not leave without one word of sympathy.

"O, Smith," I said, "what a life ! From the first moment I saw you I felt some strange attraction towards you ; and that attraction has gone on ever increasing, till—"

"Here's a ray of hope for you, Cheverley," he interrupted. "After a time, do you know, I really think I may get to be like other people. If you remember, in the Bible (you are one of the few left now who read your Bible—for me, reared in the North of Ireland, it is almost unnecessary to say I was 'well grounded' in Holy Writ), when the deaf and dumb spirit was finally cast out of the child, whom it had torn and oftentimes cast into the fire and into the waters to destroy him, with the words, '*I charge thee come out of him, and enter no more into him,*' 'it rent him sore, and he was as one dead,' 'I have been rent sore, and was as one dead,' but now, I think, I hope, I feel that I have passed through the worst of my trouble, and, with God's good help, I

shall be lifted up, and face the rest of my life with a courage I feel I have hitherto lacked."

I could not answer him. Like Stephen's, his face seemed transfigured as he spoke. I could not even say, "The Lord bless you and keep you!" I was only able to wring his hand in mute farewell ere starting to seek the doctor, whose name he had given me, and with whom I drove back to Leytonstone.

He proved utterly inscrutable. He was most polite to Adelaide, courteous to me, tender to the child, and, as we walked to the gate together, said,

"We will do all that is possible for the dear little fellow!"

I really did not know what to make of him; but when Smith came down next day he explained the parable.

"Let her find out for herself, poor soul, what is coming. It will be a tedious case; and she will know the worst before the worst comes."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CONCLUSION.

Two years have passed like a watch in the night, and it is summer once again. I am standing beside the window, looking out, with sad, dissatisfied eyes, upon the wealth of flowers with which the Leytonstone garden is filled. In the orchard behind the house early fruit is, I know, hanging, red and golden, ripening in the sun. Where shall I be by the time it is fit to gather? What will have happened before, if ever, I again see the roses and the lavender hedge, the pinks and the myrtles, and the dappled maples with splashes of curious green upon their white leaves, and the graceful acacias scattering their airy blossoms on the ground?

For I mean to leave England for a time; and when I return, to take a house, or part of one, in London, and, gathering my books around me, try to resume the dreamy abstracted life of contemplation and study Mr. Amiott's legacy interrupted. No, I cannot go on as I have been

doing. In a man's life there comes a time when he feels he must have a settled home of some sort ; and, as it seems the home I desire, is never to be for me, I intend to make the best of my position and take what I can get.

As I stand thus alone, looking through a perfect bower of greenery which shades the open window, at the garden rich in beauty, bathed in sunlight lying calm in the glory of the summer noon, I feel very mournful and most unhappy. No longer do I see, in imagination, the fair fields of life full of the daisies and buttercups I once thought to wander through. Gone is the golden glitter of the buttercups, closed are the daisy eyes of the stretching meads. Life unrolls its dreary scroll before my eyes—as it is to be, not as it might have been ; and for a moment my courage fails me to look on through the years, unbrightened by a single hope, uncheered by the presence of any human being to whom I am all in all.

Yet through the gloom of my own despair a sentence keeps recurring, which Mr. Smith spoke in the September following his interview with Mr. Frankford.

"I do not believe that, so long as we are in this world, the words 'too late' have any real meaning. It is *never* too late to make a fresh beginning, to try to make amends for what we have done wrong, to turn our foolishness into wisdom ; even at the eleventh hour, if we set ourselves valiantly to the task, we may make a bad day's work a good one."

The first step he took along the fresh road he said he was steadily purposed to travel, surprised me greatly. He proposed himself as a tenant for The Snuggery. "I mean to bring my father over to end his days in his son's home," he explained, "and I know he would delight in the garden and the river, and the beauty and the peace of Reedbourne. Will you humour my fancy ?"

No need for me to answer "Yes," for he knew I should be only too glad to see him out of those dreary chambers, where he had toiled and suffered and fainted by the way, and recovered and gone on again, and fought a good fight, which at length wrought his deliverance from debt, and doubt, and secrecy.

"Say you will let me have The Snuggery," he said, repeating the name with the pleasure of a child talking

about some new toy, "and I will finish my big book there, and put my own name to it."

"Have The Snuggery, by all means," I answered. "Here is a letter which has just arrived from Rodewald, asking if he might keep it on for a month or two; so I can say in answer it is let."

"I had better go and see him," decided Smith; and after a long talk together he left, and repaired to the City office where he had so often gone before on such weary, trying errands.

Mr. Rodewald was not there; he was at View Water, the boy said; and accordingly to View Water Mr. Smith repaired.

That place had been advertised to let, and the visitor did not therefore feel surprised to see it in the hands of workmen, who were painting, papering, plastering, decorating. Mr. Rodewald, as chief foreman of the repairs, happened to be on the lawn talking to a carpenter as Mr. Smith appeared, and he instantly came forward, and, with the heartiest cordiality and a word of genial greeting, extended his hand.

"We need not shake hands," said Smith; "I came to speak to you on business, if you can spare a moment."

"I have always stood your friend," declared Mr. Rodewald, "and this is the return I meet with!"

Into which question Mr. Smith firmly declined to enter. "I have come to tell you I have taken The Snuggery, and Miss Lydney and the children are welcome to remain there for a time if you wish; but I shall require possession at Michaelmas. I believe you are going to send Annie to school abroad, and mean to cut your fortunes adrift from those of your sister-in-law. If it be so, I should greatly like to come to some arrangement by which she and Susan could continue to reside permanently at The Snuggery. Take a few days to consider the matter, and let me know your decision. I am sure she would like to stop."

Spite of the rebuff he had received, Mr. Rodewald accompanied his visitor to the outer gate, indeed he walked with him part of the way back to Thamesford.

"I suppose," conjectured Mr. Smith, "Mrs. Posinby has got a long rent for View Water?"

"Mrs. Posinby is no more," calmly replied Mr. Rodewald.

"Why, when did she die? I never heard a word of her death."

"She is not dead, she has only changed her name. She is now Mrs. Rodewald."

Mr. Smith stopped short in the middle of the road. "Gracious Heavens! Posinby has not been in his grave more than two months!" he exclaimed.

"I know that; but affairs were in such a state it was necessary for some one to take the helm, and I certainly did not mean to do so without having an interest in the vessel."

"Mrs. Posinby's sprained ankle was a fortunate accident for you, Rodewald," said Mr. Smith.

"That remains to be seen," answered the conquering hero.

No need to say there is no visiting between View Water and The Snuggery. Twice a year Miss Lydney is solemnly invited to dinner, twice a year she as formally declines; but she is very, very happy at the little cottage amongst the green fields. And Smith has published his great book; and I know no sight which ever pleased me more than to see him and his father wandering along the bank of the Reed together, or sitting beside a blazing fire of logs in a silence and content too great to be broken by speech.

And for me?

During the time which has come and gone since we laid Adelaide's child to rest in the graveyard at Leytonstone, across which the evening sun sheds its last lingering rays, I have been almost a wanderer on the face of the earth.

Feeling as I do towards her, it is a simple impossibility I can resume the relations of our charming earlier intimacy.

For long after the child's death she was very ill; and when at last she crept down, a shadow of her former self, and took her accustomed seat, and laid her dear head back in the easy-chair, she said,

"I have thought it all out, kindest and truest of friends, and it was best for the little one to go. He is safe with One who will never forsake or desert him; and he would not have been safe if his father had claimed him—as he would of a certainty have done some day."

"No," I answered, "he could never have claimed him."

"What is it you mean?" she asked; and then some-

thing in my face told her what we had kept back for months. And, with a great sob of anguish and relief, she cried, "He is dead!"

"He fell in a duel, Adelaide," I explained.

"This is the reason why I have been a wanderer; and now, as I said at first, I mean, though I feel happiness is not for me, to try and make a home for myself somewhere. Before I settle down I am going to America. I shall leave London to-night for Liverpool; and, on my return, think of getting one of Adelaide's brothers over to live with her at the farm. She will never be able to sing again, and is coming gradually to realise the truth.

"Why don't you ask her to marry you?" Smith said to me plainly this morning; and then I told him it was not fitting—May and December, youth and age; that I felt it impossible to let her know what had always been in my heart. "I could not," I went on, "disturb her simple faith in my fatherly affection—make it hard for her to continue under my roof." It was not possible for me exactly to understand Mr. Smith's muttered commentary as he flung himself out of the room; but I gathered it was scarcely complimentary to my common sense.

And so I stand beside the window, thinking of the daisies and buttercups that can bloom for me no more—of the exquisite dreams shattered—of the tender visions dispelled. I am summoning up all my manhood to end this portion of my life, and, resolutely turning my back to the past, set a brave face towards a more satisfactory future, when I am roused from my reverie by a hand lightly laid on my shoulder, and, turning, see Adelaide standing by my side.

"Well, dear?" I say.

How fair she is still, spite of all the sorrow she has passed through—nay, because of it she is lovelier, sweeter, tenderer than of yore! She looks at me wistfully, and there is something lying in the depths of her eyes I do not quite understand.

"I want you to tell me *why* you are going away?" she begins, with soft decision.

"Because I want to see America before I die."

"That is not all, is it? Why are you going—really?"

"I cannot stay, because—"

"Yes, dear friend?"

"It is impossible for me to stop here—"

"Why?"

She held my hand in hers, and stroked it slowly, slowly.

"Adelaide you know—"

Some powers stronger than myself wrung the words from me.

"Yes, I know," she whispers.

"I could not remain here without asking you to be my wife, and that I must not do—"

"Why not?"

And then I can tell no more, save that next moment I hold her to my heart. The sadness, the pain, the loneliness is over!

O, how the flowers in the garden bloom now! How exquisite seems the delicate tracery of green leaves across the window! Did acacias ever before scatter such feathery blossoms? What man so blest as I?

The door opens and Smith comes in. He understands what has happened at a glance. He ought, since but for him I might still have been drifting on a sea of doubt and indecision.

"She has promised to marry me—" I begin; and then I stop, for I can say no more.

He looks at Adelaide with a whimsical smile as he remarks,

"I really do not know whether I ought to congratulate you, Cheverley. *Remember, it is extremely difficult to foretell how any wife may turn out!*"

THE END.

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